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**Please print** MAR. 191

# MIKE SHAYNE
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

MARCH, 1966 Vol. 18, No. 4


**NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL**

## THE GOOD CITIZEN

by BRETT HALLIDAY

*One alone had seen murder in the night—had seen a killer's face and had been seen by him. Now Mike Shayne must save him from gangland's guns—or be himself their prey.*


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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE, VOL. 18 No. 4. March, 1966. Published monthly by RENOWN PUBLICATIONS, INC. 160 W. 46th St., N. Y., N. Y. 10036. Subscriptions, 12 issues $6.00; 24 issues $12.00; single copies 50¢. Second-class postage paid at New York, N. Y. and at additional mailing offices. Places and characters in this magazine are wholly fictitious


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Postmaster—return 3579 to 160 W. 46th St., New York, New York. 10036

Featuring

# MIKE SHAYNE

# The Good Citizen

*It was just stubbornness on Shayne's part perhaps. But he persisted in believing the slain man should have been a woman.*

**by BRETT HALLIDAY**

THE MAN WAS of average height, dark-haired, about forty-five, and tanned from the constant sun of Miami. His name was Carl Betzer. He was an ordinary man who worked as an accountant for a large department store in downtown Miami. There was nothing at all special about him—until he walked down the street that night.

The street was an ordinary side street of Miami Beach. A quiet street of houses and smaller family hotels set back and away from the gaudy main street and big hotels and motels on the ocean front that gave Miami Beach its reputation. Not a cheap or rundown street, but not a street that glittered like diamonds in the rich and expensive night illumination.

The hotel was a five-story yellow brick building. It had a chaste and respectable entrance, a quiet lobby complete with clean but cheap furniture, potted palms, and a sleepy night clerk. There was a single elevator, a front stairs, and

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a back stairs with shower where patrons could enter if they had just come from the beach three blocks away.

The night was dark, but the street was well lighted. There was a street light directly across the street from the hotel entrance. The hotel was named, invitingly if untruthfully, The Blue Beach View Hotel. It offered both light-housekeeping rooms and rooms for transients.

Carl Betzer, walked beneath the glittering lights toward the hotel but on the opposite side of the street. He had been visiting a friend, and was now walking toward the busier sections where he intended to catch a bus back into Miami proper, where he lived. He reached the street light directly across from the Blue Beach View Hotel at exactly 10:45 P.M.

He heard a scream, a shout of anger, and a window shade going up. The shade whirred and slapped noisily as it went up. Carl Betzer glanced across the street toward the hotel. He happened to be directly beneath the street light. His eyes saw the unshaded window on the second floor front of the hotel. From where he stood he could see clearly into the second floor room. What he saw made him stop in his tracks.

In the room, the lights on, a man and a woman were struggling. Betzer was sure he saw that clearly. The man raised some object, and struck the woman once, twice, three times. There was blood. A mass of blood on the woman and on the man. The woman slumped, fell against the closed window. Glass broke. The woman fell to the floor and vanished. Her assailant stared down, brushed the blood from his eyes, and turned to close the shade of the broken window.

The man in the second floor room looked directly into the eyes of Carl Betzer across the street.

They stared at each other for a long minute. The man in the room was tall, heavyset, pale-faced and muscular-looking.

He leaned abruptly forward and pulled down the shade.

Carl Betzer stood under the street light, and stared up at the window. Then he looked up and down the street as if searching for someone else who might have seen what he had seen, looking for corroboration. There was no one. He looked up at the window again. Perhaps he had really seen nothing—an illusion. Or perhaps he had exaggerated what he had seen in his mind—a fight, a quarrel, and nothing more.

But he could see the broken window. The light was still on behind the shade. Some faint stain on the shattered glass—blood.

Still, it was probably just a fight, a lovers' spat.

Carl Betzer turned and walked away along the quiet street. He

remembered what they always said about policemen, that the worst call a cop could get was to stop a fight between husband and wife. Nine times out of ten both the husband and the wife turned on the cop when he tried to help. He wanted no part of getting in the middle of a husband-wife spat. It was even legally dangerous. If he got involved, and it was husband and wife, and he hurt the man, he could get sued!

He walked on until he reached the brighter lights. Here there were many people all enjoying themselves, on the town for the night. Betzer felt better. He decided to take a taxi. If he found one soon he would be home in good time and not feel tired and sleepy in the office tomorrow. He did not like to feel tired at his work, and he looked hopefully for an empty taxi. Soon he saw one. He raised his hand to wave.

But he knew the woman had been killed.

He was sure. Three times the big man had hit her with the object. There had been blood—blood all over her and the man. He knew that the woman was dead, killed, murdered. He had witnessed a murder. And he thought of all the people he had read about lately who had seen murder and done nothing. A man had certain obligations. To shirk them was cowardly—or worse.

Carl Betzer looked up and down the bright street. He saw a bar. He strode quickly through the swinging doors and into a telephone booth. He called the police. He told them what he had seen. They took the details and told him they would be right over.

"Stay where you are," the sergeant said over the telephone. "We'll need your statement. An officer will pick you up."

When the uniformed policeman came into the bar where Carl Betzer was waiting, it was already 11:15. He had taken quite a time to make up his mind to call. The policeman took him back to the quiet street and the Blue Beach View Hotel. Inside the hotel sev-

eral policemen in uniform, and a small, dapper-looking man in plainclothes were waiting.

The night clerk was sleepy and annoyed, but he seemed eager to cooperate. "I heard like a yell, yeh," the night clerk said, addressing the dapper-looking man. "Maybe half an hour ago. I didn't hear it again, so I figured it was just one of our regulars lushing it up some. You know how it is, Chief Painter."

"Yeah," Miami Beach Chief of Detectives Peter Painter said. "I know how it is with some of your beach-boy tenants."

Painter turned to Carl Betzer. "Okay, Mr.—?"

"Betzer, Carl Betzer. I was just walking by and I saw—"

"Yeh, okay, Mr. Betzer," Painter broke in. "Now which room was it?"

"Front on the right, second floor —all the way to the right. It's got the broken window," Carl Betzer said.

A policeman nodded. "Window there is busted, Chief."

"That would be Two-D," the night clerk said.

Peter Painter led the way up the stairs without a word. A nod of his head had stationed uniformed men in front of the elevator, the lobby door, and the rear door. Carl Betzer and the night clerk followed the dapper little figure of Peter Painter. At the door of 2-D, Painter made them all stand back. The Chief of Detectives tried the door. It was open. Painter stepped warily inside, his pistol drawn. He looked down.

The others waited in the clean but dim hallway.

Painter opened the door wider and motioned them all inside. They all stepped in. Carl Betzer looked around eagerly. The window was smashed. The window shade was down and bloody. There was blood on the floor. And there was a dead body lying there with its head smashed in. Carl Betzer stared.

"Okay," Painter said, "You saw a killing. Only your eyes are not very good, are they?"

Carl Betzer blinked.

The body on the floor was a man—an old, grey, dirty man.

## II

MIKE SHAYNE blinked in the bright morning sun. He raised his big frame from the bed and glared at the ringing telephone. His hands rumpled the shock of unruly red hair that topped his gaunt face. Lucy would not ring him this early. And not many people had his private number. He reached for the black instrument.

"Mike? Did I wake you?"

It was the bright and cheery voice of his reporter friend, Tim Rourke of *The Miami Daily News.*

"You did," Shayne barked. "It better be good, whatever it is. I was on a case until three A.M."

"It's good," Rourke said amiably. "I've got a client for you, and a nifty little puzzle. You want to come here to my office, or shall I bring him down to your place?"

Shayne yawned into the receiver. "How about some details first?"

"Sure. One of our younger police reporters went out on a routine call last night on the Beach," Rourke said. "A man saw someone getting badly beaten. Just a passer-by who saw it through the window. He called the police, just as any public-spirited citizen would. He waited for the cops, and when our good friend Chief Painter entered the room where it was all supposed to have happened, Betzer was with him. The corpse was there all right, beaten to death just as advertised."

Shayne yawned again, and swore softly. "Damn it, Tim, just a routine beating? What does—"

There was a chuckle on the far end of the line that made Shayne stop. Rourke paused before he spoke again.

"Routine, maybe, Mike. You see there was one problem. Betzer, our public-spirited eye-witness, says it was a woman he saw being beaten to death. The trouble is, Chief Painter found a *man* dead in that room!"

Shayne reached for a cigarette. "Okay, Tim, so our eye-witness just got the victim and the killer mixed up. The woman is the killer."

"Maybe, but then there were three of them in the room, and the man who's dead doesn't fit the man Betzer saw," Rourke said. "Besides, Betzer saw the woman go down, and he saw the man clearly, because he came to the window to pull down the shade. Betzer and the man had a long look at each other, and the dead man doesn't fit."

"The killer saw your man?" Shayne said."

"Yes, Mike. That's why Betzer wants some help. He's scared to death. He knows the man saw him real good, because he was standing under a street light. Now the whole thing looks bigger than he first thought, and he's really scared. My kid reporter brought him to me."

"Who lived in that room?" Shayne said.

"It was registered to Mr. John Smith, New York," Rourke said.

"I'll be right down to my office," Shayne said. "Bring the good citizen."

Shayne hung up, showered, dressed, drank two cups of dripolator coffee, and strode from his apartment. He drove his car out of the apartment-hotel garage and through the heavy Miami traffic to Flagler Street and his office. His brown-eyed secretary, Lucy Ham-

ilton, looked up as he came into the outer office.

"They're waiting inside, Michael," she said.

"Thanks, Angel," Shayne said. "Call Painter and tell him I'd like permission to view a corpse. He'll want to wrap it in red tape, so see how soon we can get started. Okay?"

"Right away, Michael," Lucy said.

Shayne left his secretary already efficiently at work, and went into his private office. The elongated frame of his reporter friend was stretched out comfortably in one of his better chairs.

Rourke waved a greeting. Shayne strode to his desk and sat down. Then he looked at the other man in the office. A dark-haired man of average height, about forty-five, tanned from the Florida sun, and very frightened.

"Mike," Tim Rourke said, "This is Mr. Carl Betzer. Mr. Betzer is an accountant. He was just walking home from visiting a friend."

"Let Mr. Betzer tell me, Tim," Shayne said quietly. "He was there. Just tell it straight, Mr. Betzer, as you remember it."

Betzer's voice shook as he talked. "All I did was see it through a window. Now he'll be after me! I mean, I'm just an ordinary guy. Nothing like this ever happened to me before. I know what they do to you! All I did was look up at a window. Only it was a woman, I'll swear it. And now it's all mixed up, and they know what I look like!"

"Take it easy," Shayne said, "and start from the beginning. Try not to leave anything out."

Betzer nodded, took a deep breath. He began to relate in detail the events of the night before. Shayne tugged slowly on his left earlobe as he listened to the story. When Betzer had finished, the detective sat for a long minute looking out the high window that overlooked Miami dazzling in the sun. Then he turned to Betzer.

"And you think this man is after you—the big one you saw?" Shayne said.

"I don't know for sure it was the man I saw. But someone followed me from that police station," Betzer said. "He followed me all the way to my apartment in Miami. I didn't get too good a look at him. I lost him in the building, I think, but I'm not sure about that either. You've got to protect me!"

"You don't happen to know anyone involved in this, do you?"

"No, Mr. Shayne, I swear it!"

Shayne narrowed his grey eyes. "You're sure you saw a woman killed, but Painter found a man?"

"Yes," Betzer said.

"You could have been mistaken. A dark night, across a street, violent action and all of that."

"That's what the police think,"

Betzer said bitterly. "But I know what I saw! It was a woman I saw killed! It's some sort of trick! I don't care what that clerk says, there was a woman in that room! And I saw that big man, no matter what the police think!"

"They don't believe you?" Shayne said.

Betzer laughed angrily. "How much are they going to believe a man who can't tell a man from a woman? That man they found was just a bum, a derelict! They think it was just a fight among drifters. But there's something frightening going on!"

"All right, Betzer, calm down," Shayne said soothingly. "I'll look into it, and I'll get a man to protect you."

The redhead turned to his intercom and buzzed Lucy. His secretary's voice answered at once.

"Get Max Green, Angel, and tell him I need a bodyguard job done. Usual rates, and I want him here right away."

"Yes, Michael," Lucy said.

Shayne clicked off the intercom and sat back in his chair. Betzer sat sunk in a kind of terrified apathy. Shayne watched the man and thought about the case. Betzer was probably mistaken, but if he wasn't mistaken, something peculiar *was* going on. It was a problem that interested Shayne. From the way Betzer had described what he saw, a double killing was very unlikely.

It had all the sound of a sudden murder, brutal and unpremeditated. And yet for some reason, the corpse had changed sex in a matter of a half an hour! Unless Betzer had mixed up the rooms!

A half an hour passed before Max Green arrived, but Shayne learned nothing more from his frightened client. Green took charge, and Betzer left with the private detective Shayne often used for such jobs. Max was a cheerful, reliable, and totally brave man. Betzer would be safe with Max—as safe as anyone could ever be.

Shayne, left alone with Tim Rourke, began to tug on his left ear.

"What do you think, Mike?" the reporter asked.

"I don't know, Tim," Shayne said. "He probably saw it all wrong. You know how eye-witnesses are. But if he didn't—" The redhead left the sentence unfinished.

"If he didn't there's something

awfully peculiar about it all, right?" Rourke said.

"Very peculiar," Shayne agreed. "If Betzer wasn't deceived about what he saw we don't know if we have one or two murders! We can't even be sure that the derelict was the victim of a wilful murderer."

"Well, let's hope we don't have three murders, Rourke said.

"Max is good, Tim. Betzer will be okay," Shayne said. And the redhead stood up. "Meanwhile, I better get to work."

"Where will you start, Mike?" Rourke asked.

"Well, I think I'll try to find out just what Betzer *did* see last night," Shayne said.

"The Blue Beach View Hotel?"

"Right."

"What do you want me to do?" the reporter asked.

"See what you can find out about Mr. Carl Betzer," Shayne said.

Rourke looked startled. "You think—"

"I don't think anything, Tim, but I want to know," Shayne said.

With that the detective clapped his panama on his head and strode from his office.

## III

THE HOTEL WAS quiet and sleepy in the afternoon sun of Miami Beach. Mike Shayne parked across the street and looked at the yellow brick building. He noted the window on the second floor front that was still broken.

Shayne got out of his car and went to stand silently under the street light.

From beneath the light he had a clear view of the window. The shade was down now, but Shayne could see that the window was low—the second floor not very high above the street. The first floor of the hotel was lower than street level, the lobby entrance two steps down. Shayne estimated that at night, with the shade raised, it would not be hard to see into a lighted room on the second floor.

He crossed the quiet side street and entered the lobby. It was a nondescript lobby, clean but cheap. The man behind the small desk with its grillwork cage was also clean and probably cheap. A tall, slender man who looked more like a church deacon than a Miami Beach hotel clerk. Even in the tropical heat, with the sunlight filtered into the lobby through high windows, the man wore a black suit.

"Yes sir," he said, "what can I do for you?"

"Are you the day clerk?" Shayne asked.

"Day clerk and manager," the man said. "We don't go in for unnecessary frills here. That keeps our rates down. Are you planning

to stay with us? We have a few nice rooms left, some with—"

"Police," Shayne said as officially as possible, and flashed his badge and credentials.

The manager looked disconcerted. "More police?" he said. "Really, officer, what more can I tell you? I wasn't even on duty last night."

"Just a recheck to complete our records," Shayne said mildly. "Now you say the room was rented to a Mr. John Smith of New York?"

"Yes, he'd been here some months," the manager said, loosening his collar nervously.

"What did he look like? Was he the dead man?" Shayne asked.

"No, I don't think so."

"You don't think so?"

"I never saw Mr. Smith," the manager said. "He worked nights and slept in the day time. I go off at three P.M. Linder rented the room and saw the man. He said the dead man was not Smith. I believe Jacob already described Mr. Smith to you."

"Jacob Linder would be the night clerk?" Shayne asked.

"Yes," the manager said, cocking his head sideways as he looked at Shayne. "Are you sure you have to ask these questions?"

"I'm from a different department," Shayne said. "We like to get our own answers. So you didn't know either John Smith or the dead man?"

"I didn't say that," the manager said. "I didn't say I did not know the dead man. I did. His name was Fred."

"Fred what?"

"Just Fred, a drifter, a hobo you might say. He did odd jobs here from time to time. I believe he was quite well known around the Beach."

The detective thought about this for a moment, while the manager watched him.

"All right," Shayne said at last. "Have you ever seen a tall, heavy-set man with a pale face and a muscular build around here? Maybe such a person visited Mr. Smith? Or such a man might have been a friend of the dead man, Fred?"

"I recall no such man," the manager said. "The other police asked me that. *They* thought Mr. Smith might look like that."

"He didn't?" Shayne snapped.

"Not according to Linder. Mr. Smith was a small man, slender and blond."

"What about a woman? Did Smith or Fred have a woman friend?"

"Not that I ever saw," the manager said. "But we do have quite a few young women staying here. This *is* a hotel, you know."

"So I gather," Shayne said drily. "Okay, I guess that's all. Thanks for the trouble."

"No trouble at all, officer," the somber manager said.

Shayne walked out of the lobby into the sun. He crossed the street to his car, and started the motor. He drove away and turned the nearest corner. He parked again and got out of the car. He walked around the block to the rear entrance to The Blue Beach. Carefully, so that no one would see him, he went into the hotel through the rear entrance and climbed the rear stairs to the second floor.

Shayne moved silently along the dim corridor toward the front where sunlight streamed through the hall window. He reached the door to the room with the broken window. The door was locked. The detective used the keys on his special ring. He found the right skeleton key and opened the door. He stepped into the room, closed the door behind him, and locked it.

It was a small room, but had a private bath and light cooking facilities—refrigerator, double hot plate, a small pantry with dishes and silverware. There was a stain of blood on the carpet in front of the broken window and blood on the shade that was down.

Two small tables had been smashed, a mirror was broken, and a heavy arm chair lay on its side. A chalk outline on the rug showed where the body of the dead Fred had been found. The mark fitted someone killed in view of the window.

Shayne lighted a cigarette and studied the room. Except for the damage from the fight the room was neat and tidy. The bed had been slept in recently—a large double bed. But nothing else in the room appeared to have been used lately. The dishes on the small pantry shelves were stacked neatly. Shayne touched them. They bore a faint layer of dust.

The silverware, too, did not appear to have been needed in some time. Only two glasses seemed to have been used—they stood upended in the drainboard basket at the edge of the small sink. They had been dusted for prints, with no luck from the look of them.

Shayne looked for a bottle, but if there had been one it was gone. He went into the tiny bathroom. Neither the shower nor the sink seemed to have been used much—there was no washcloth, the towels were crisp and new, the soap in the soap dishes were both full cakes. He opened the medicine cabinet, and began to tug on his left earlobe as he took an inventory of its contents.

The shelves were nearly empty. But they did contain a bottle of spray deodorant, a long nail file, and a half-empty can of baby powder. Shayne tugged harder on his ear. No shaving tools, no cream or razor, and no sign of anything else that might be expected to be in the medicine cabinet of a man!

The nail file was a woman's file,

the powder and the deodorant were more a woman's than a man's, and yet if a woman had lived in this apartment there should have also been much more in the medicine cabinet!

Shayne turned quickly and went back into the main room. He strode to the closet. There was only the one closet. It was empty. But there were two hangers in it that might have been used recently. He checked the single chest of drawers. They were lined with tissue paper and had held clothes, but not many.

And there were no shirt cardboards! A man living alone almost always accumulated shirt cardboards from laundries. But the drawers were completely empty now. Obviously, the police had taken what clothes they had found, but there could have been very few clothes.

Shayne again stood and surveyed the room. It had a 'wrong' aura about it—as if it had never really been lived in. A man leaves some mark on a room, some evidence of his presence. And so does a woman who lives for any length of time in a room. The nail file and deodorant pointed to a woman having been in the room recently, and yet those few small items were not enough.

*There should be more.* There were no loose items on the top of the chest of drawers. The waste basket was empty. The ashtray beside the bed on the left side was dirty and had probably held cigarette butts taken by the police. But the ashtray on the right side was shining and spotless.

The room did not make sense.

Shayne looked it over again, slowly. Two glasses used, the rest of the plates and silverware unused for some time. The shower and bathroom sink unused, the medicine cabinet almost empty, the wastebasket empty, one ashtray dirty and one cleaned, no trace of the small litter everyone leaves in a room, and yet there had been *some* clothes—presumably men's clothing or Peter Painter would have been more interested in Betzer's story.

It did not fit. Either a room was lived in or it wasn't. And who had lived in this room? The elusive Mr. Smith, or the even more elusive woman?

Still puzzling over the room, Shayne turned to the window. He raised the shade. The street light was directly across the street. He stepped back and considered what Carl Betzer could have seen from under the lamp out there. The room was narrow, longer than it was wide, and most of it would have been visible when lighted.

Betzer could have seen all he said, and yet there were parts of the room hidden from the street. A third man could have been in the room unseen—or already dead? Perhaps the woman had

only been stunned, and had revived and gone before the police arrived. That, too, was possible. And would account for Betzer being followed.

It was the sunlight through the window that made it shine.

As Shayne turned from the window to look again at the room, his sharp eyes caught the glint. In the corner near the large double bed something had glistened in a ray of sunlight. He walked to the spot and bent down.

At first, close, he could not see the object. There seemed to be nothing there at all. Then he backed away and held his head at an angle so that the sun caught the object again. It was down between a narrow crack in the floorboards. When he stood above and looked straight down it was invisible.

He could not reach the object with his fingers. He reached into his pocket and brought out his ring of pick-locks and skeleton keys. Probing with a long pick-lock, he brought the object out from between the floorboards. It shone in the sun as he held it in his big hand.

A fake silver dollar. An advertising gimmick and lucky-piece handed out to patrons of a combination road-house-gambling joint just outside Miami in Dade County called *The Silver Dollar.* A gambling house and saloon that was one of Ray Incavo's joints!

Shayne held the shiny cartwheel. This quiet, cheap hotel did not seem like the kind of place Incavo's customers would pick to stay. And the corpse they had found in the room, was that of a drifter, a hobo. Incavo's clients might become hobos after Ray got through with them, but bums rarely frequented gambling clubs. Shayne put the souvenir dollar into his pocket and stood up.

There might be a connection. The manager had said that the unknown Mr. Smith worked nights! People who worked for Incavo usually worked nights. A connection was possible. Shayne looked down at the floor again. He bent down. From the way the fake dollar had been wedged down between the boards it looked as if the piece had been there for some time. Deep enough down for Painter to have missed it. It seemed unlikely that it had a specific connection to the affair last night. Still, it was a lead, however slim, and—

The light, soft step was close behind him.

He had not heard the door open. He mentally swore at himself for leaving the door unlocked behind him, and for not being alert. He started to turn and lunge aside at the same time. He was far too late. He had a glimpse of a man—a small, blond man.

Something heavy but not rigid struck his head and he went down. He went down and out. But even

as his brain seemed to explode in thunder he remembered that he *had* locked the door!

## IV

MIKE SHAYNE came awake lying flat on his back on something not hard but not soft either. It gave when he moved, but there were sharp pressures against his back and legs. Something narrow, his right arm hanging off an edge into empty space. He listened, but he heard nothing. Silence. Then, listening more closely, faint voices, the clang of metal once, twice, and somewhere a low singing. A low, blue song, sung soft and sad.

He opened his eyes.

He was in a room. A dim room lighted by a single bulb high up. The walls and ceiling were grey. There was a strange pattern of light on the ceiling. A pattern of large squares made by sunlight coming through a window. Squares of light with lines of dark —like bars. He sat up suddenly and his head swam. He caught onto the wall. The dizziness passed and the wall he held was concrete. He looked to his right. There was no wall to his right, only the steel bars of a cage.

Shayne was in jail.

He was sitting now on a narrow bunk set against the wall beneath the barred window. There was one window too high to look out even standing on the bunk. A

wash-stand and a toilet were the only things in the cell.

Shayne recognized the cell. He was in the Miami Beach Police Headquarters jail. People were talking somewhere along the corridor outside the bars of his cell. The cells across the corridor were all empty. The singing came from much closer than he had thought. Some prisoner singing low and blue.

Shayne stood up, swayed, and walked toward the barred side of his cell. He felt his head. There was a faint lump, but there was also a wide, tender soft spot. He had been hit with something like a sap or sandbag. Hit very neatly. And he remembered both the glimpse of the smallish, blond man, and that the door *had* been locked behind him. Whoever hit him had had a key! Small and blond, the description of John Smith from New York!

Shayne began to bang on the steel bars with his fists.

"Johnson! Parker! Who the hell put me in here!" Shayne roared.

There was a noise out of sight down the corridor. Footsteps, and a uniformed man appeared. The man was smiling from ear to ear. He carried a large ring of keys and stood there in the corridor grinning at Shayne.

"Well, well, our star criminal is awake!" he said.

Shayne swore. "Damn it, Parker, what the devil am I doing in here?"

Officer Parker, the jailer, grinned wider. "You'll have to ask the Chief. He said to lock you up. He said he had you this time. He was real happy, Shayne."

"I'll bet he was," Shayne said drily. "Do I talk to Painter, or do I call my lawyer? Do I call Chief Gentry to get my lawyer?"

Sam Parker, laughed again. "Hold your horses, Mike. I was supposed to kid you along for a while and then bring you up to the Chief. You feel okay?"

"I feel fine, but Painter won't when I get him," Shayne said.

Parker frowned. "Take it easy, Mike, I think Chief Painter has a real charge, if he wants to use it."

"Okay, Parker, just let me out. We'll see about Painter's charge," Shayne said.

Parker grinned again and opened the door. Shayne picked up his battered panama and clapped it gingerly onto his dishevelled red hair. He had felt better. His mouth was as dry as a thirsty camel after a month in the Sahara. Parker waited while he took a long drink of water and straightened his tie and suit. Then the jailer led him out of the cell, along the corridor, and out into the main corridors of Miami Beach Headquarters.

Shayne walked into the office of Miami Beach Chief of Detectives Peter Painter. The dapper little Chief looked up at him.

"What the hell is all this, Painter?" Shayne snapped.

"You can go, Parker," Painter said, waving Shayne to a chair.

Shayne sat down. He still felt a little shaky. Painter leaned back in the swivel chair behind his desk and looked at him.

"Breaking and entering," he said, "obstructing justice, impersonating a police officer. You knew that room was sealed by my order."

"So I made a mistake," Shayne said. "Maybe you'd do better to be looking for the man who sapped me. Short and blond. He fits the description of John Smith."

"We know who sapped you," Painter said.

"You caught Smith? What does he say about—"

"The night clerk sapped you, Shayne," Painter said, and now the dapper Chief of Detectives grinned. "The manager, Lawson,

got suspicious. He didn't believe you were a cop, so he got to thinking. The night clerk, Jacob Linder, was off duty but lives in the hotel. The manager sent Linder up to the room on a hunch, while the manager himself called us. Linder sapped you, and we carted you here. The manager will prefer charges if we want! I can get your license!"

Shayne tugged on his ear. Painter, for once, was right. If they wanted to they could get him —maybe. He grinned at Painter.

"All right, Painter, you have me. I was wrong, I should have come to you first. But I'm here now, and you've got more on your mind than my license."

"Like what?" Painter said.

"Like a woman who turned into a man," Shayne said.

Painter nodded. "You're working for Betzer?"

"He's scared," Shayne said. "I think he has good reason."

"You do, eh? Tell me about it, and I'm still thinking about that license of yours," Painter said.

Shayne leaned forward in the quiet office. From the position of the sun outside he had been out for some time. At least the reason that his attacker had had a key was explained. Linder would have had a key. And Linder, apparently, was also small and blond like the missing Smith. But it was Betzer and the vanished woman Shayne had on his mind now.

"Look," Shayne began, "Betzer swears it was a woman he saw being assaulted, maybe killed. Only you found a man, right? A derelict, a hobo. Now in that room nothing was right. Two glasses used, nothing else. Bathroom not used, but three women's items in the medicine cabinet, nothing belonging to a man. Wastebasket empty. One ashtray dirty with butts, one wiped clean. The whole place didn't seem lived in at all, yet a man was supposed to have lived there quite a while, right?

"You found some clothes, one ashtray used, probably even a suitcase. So it isn't as if anyone cleaned the place out last night. A place is lived in or it isn't, Painter, and just where is Mr. Smith?"

"We're looking for him," Painter said, "Which is about the only worthwhile suggestion you have." Painter leaned across his desk. The dapper Chief was cold and precise. "Look, Shayne, a man sees something at night through a window from across a street. He's scared, he took maybe twenty minutes to call us! So he made a mistake. Old Fred was a small man, his rags were loose, Betzer thought he was a woman. Q.E.D."

"Why was Fred killed?" Shayne asked. "And you sound like you knew him?"

"I did, we all did. Fred was a regular hobo around here. I ran him in a hundred times. And who knows why a bum gets killed? We

find bums beaten to death regularly, Shayne."

There was truth to that. Shayne nodded slowly to himself. Painter was simply giving him the arguments he had really been giving himself all along.

"And that room," Painter said. "It looked kind of bare, true. But we found a suit, three shirts, some socks and underwear, and a small suitcase. The lab says they belonged to a small man with blond hair. Smith, right? Linder, the night clerk, says he never saw anyone in that room except Smith, not that night or ever. He killed old Fred and panicked. He wiped the glasses and one ashtray, but missed the second tray. He ran in the suit he was wearing when he knew Betzer had seen him. When we pick him up we'll know why he killed Fred, and that'll end it."

"But Betzer saw a big man, muscular, pale faced and heavyset," Shayne said.

"He also saw a woman who was an old man," Painter said drily.

"The glasses were wiped clean?"

"Yes," Painter said.

"Any other prints in the room?"

"All you want, they don't scrub those rooms after every tenant," Painter said.

"Did the blood stains match with Fred?" Shayne asked.

"Some did," Painter said. "Yeh, there were two types of blood, Type O and Type AB. We figure Smith is Type O. He'll be cut up some when we find him."

"What do we know about him?" Shayne asked. But he was thinking hard now about the two types of blood. Perhaps the second type was Smith's blood, or perhaps not.

"Nothing yet. You saw the room. A transient. Nobody ever saw him around that hotel except Linder a couple of times, and one or two of the tenants. We checked carefully. We were looking high and low for Betzer's imaginary woman."

"No woman?" Shayne said.

"No woman," Painter said. "Look, Shayne, it happens every day. A transient who works nights somewhere, and a local bum. They have some booze—we found the bottle wiped clean—and they fight, period. We'll pick up Smith sooner or later. He's marked up. It would be easier if we knew where he'd worked or what he did, or if we had his prints, but we'll find him."

Shayne nodded slowly. Painter was probably right. Even Betzer was far from sure that the man following him was the man he had seen. It could be Smith. Such brutal, senseless killings happened all the time. And yet Shayne was not convinced. Something about that death room was wrong!

And there was the fake silver dollar still in his pocket that linked the room somehow to Ray

Incavo. There were the two blood types, and the few woman's things in the bathroom. There was the barren feeling of that room. Even a transient leaves more trace, if he checks in with nothing but an overnight bag.

"Any connection between old Fred and Smith?" Shayne asked.

"No, not yet, but Fred hung around the Blue Beach View at times," Painter said. "We had one of Fred's friends, another old coot on the bum named George, in to identify the body. He never heard of Smith, didn't recognize the description. But he admitted that Fred would have taken a drink in hell with the devil himself."

Shayne felt stumped, hemmed in. The redhead tugged on his earlobe. Either he, and Betzer, were all wrong, or there was something damned clever about all this. And the more he thought, the more his mind told him Painter was the one who was right.

But there was just something damned odd, strange, about it all. Something very wrong about that death room and Betzer's woman turning into an old hobo.

"What about unidentified women stiffs?" Shayne said. "Any beaten-up women corpses?"

"Three unidentified last night. Two stabbings without any beating marks; one shot, also no beating," Painter said. "We also had two smash-up deaths, both identified. One guy went home after we got his story. The two guys on the other crack-up are still downstairs. They had to patch one up at the hospital. Want to see them?"

"Car accidents?" Shayne said. "And only the woman killed?"

"I'll get them up here," Painter said.

The Chief of Miami Beach Detectives barked into his intercom. Painter lighted an elegant thin cigar while he and Shayne waited. At last the door of the office opened and two men came in. Shayne turned, and a startled look came into his eyes.

The two men smiled as they came in. One of them was a tall man, heavyset, muscular and pale-faced. The other man was small but not thin. A small, but solid sandy-haired man.

But it was the big man Shayne stared at. He fitted Carl Betzer's description, and his face, hands, and leg were bandaged. His suit

was still bloody. His arm was in a sling.

## V

THE SMALLER, well-built little man had only a few minor marks on him covered by simple bandages. It was the smaller man who spoke.

"You wanted us, Chief Painter? We'd just finished our statements."

Painter nodded. "Shayne here wanted to talk to you, Moska. You know Peter Moska, don't you, Shayne?"

"I know Mike Shayne," the smaller man said. "I don't much like peepers neither. Ain't I got enough trouble now, Painter?"

Shayne now looked more closely at the smaller man. Pete Moska. Shayne did not recognize the man, but he knew the name. A gambler! A gambler, who liked Incavo's places, and more than a gambler if you listened to some people in Miami. Pete Moska was supposed to have many sources of income, mostly illegal.

Shayne watched the smaller man. "I heard of Moska," he said. "Who's the big man? He fits, Painter! He fits like a glove."

Painter shrugged. "Shayne has a theory, gentlemen, which we don't have to go into now. But I want him to hear what happened to you two last night. The other man, Shayne, is Paul Booher. Maybe you've heard of him, too?"

"No," Shayne said, eying the big man. Paul Booher perfectly fitted Betzer's description. But that description could also fit a great many other men. Only—how many of the other men would be bloody and cut up as if they had recently been in a fight in a second floor room?

"Well, Mr. Booher is a solid citizen from out-of-state, Connecticut to be exact," Painter said. "He happens to enjoy the night life and the gambling, so he comes down here regularly. Last night he had a private game with Moska there. Now I don't like Moska much, and I don't believe all he tells me, but this time the story holds. You want to tell it again, Moska?"

"Why not?" the smaller man said. "She's dead."

Shayne narrowed his grey eyes as he looked at the small punk. Moska's voice had cracked and his shoulders seemed to sag where he sat in the office. He leaned forward in his chair and held his head in his hands for a moment. Then Moska shrugged and looked up. He looked straight at Shayne with something very close to hatred in his dark eyes.

"We had this game, you know? Maybe nine o'clock Ruthie brings Booher in. I can see he's drunk, but he wants to play, so who am I to turn him down? Well, we play. Ruthie she takes a nap like. We—"

"Who else was in the game?" Shayne asked.

Moska stared at Shayne. "What is this, Chief? I mean, what's this shamus creep tryin' to say? You got anythin' on me?"

"Just tell the man and let's get it over," Painter said.

Moska shrugged. "Okay. There was Joe and Cosmo Vitale, Max Byrne, and Pat Riordan."

"Friends of yours, I suppose," Shayne said.

"Friends of mine," Moska said, and for an instant Shayne thought he saw a gleam in the small gambler's eyes.

"Get on with it," Painter snapped.

"Well," Moska said, "about eleven Booher, he just about passes out. I'm disgusted, you know, only what can you do? He was a good loser, so I figure I'll cart him home to his hotel. Ruthie wants to come along. So we go. My place is out of town a way, and I'm in a hurry. I mean, who wants to nurse a drunk all night?

"I guess I had too much booze myself, who knows? Anyway, we ain't on the road five minutes when it happens. This big heap, a trailer truck, you know, comes out of nowhere. I guess I cut him too close. We sideswipes and over I go. We're in the ditch, in the trees, rollin' over. I guess we was lucky she didn't burn. Anyway, we hit hard, you should see the car."

"What time was this again?" Painter said.

"Who knows for sure? Eleven-fifteen, eleven-thirty, something like that. I was in a hurry 'cause we had another pigeon at twelve, you know? Anyway, we hit and that's the last I know for a hell of a time. The car it don't burn and I come to. I feel around but all I got is a bump on the head! How you like that?

"I see Booher and he's a mess, blood all over him. Only he starts groanin' and I see that most of it ain't his blood, it's Ruthie's blood! Yeh, Ruthie! I'm not scratched hardly, Booher, he got cuts 'n bruises 'n a busted arm, but Ruthie's dead! Dead!"

The small man glared his hatred at Shayne. "She's my wife, you know! Ruthie's my broad and she's dead! I drag her out of that wreck and I try to bring her back. Booher, he's out of it, still drunk and smashed up. What can I do? Nobody sees us. So I get up on the highway and I flag down a truck to get the cops and an ambulance. Only it's too late; Ruthie's dead!"

Moska held his head in his hands. The big man, Paul Booher looked guilty as if he felt it was all his fault. Painter finished the story.

"It was twelve thirty when the truck driver spotted Moska on the road. State Police and the ambulance got there about twelve forty-five. It all checked. The car was a wreck, Booher was banged up, and the woman, Ruth Moska, was dead from a skull fracture. Both Booher and Moska checked out for too

much alcohol in them, especially Booher. He was so drunk and banged up they wouldn't release him from the hospital until a few hours ago after he sobered and they took X-rays and all that."

There was a silence in the office. Painter fingered his thin pencil mustache and looked into space. Booher fidgeted but his eyes were flat and calm. The big man seemed tense but not worried. Moska still held his head in his hands as if the death of his wife was a blow he would never get over.

Shayne looked at Moska, and he did not believe a word of the story. It was too neat, too convenient. He tried to recall just what illegal enterprises Moska had besides gambling.

"There it is, Shayne," Painter said finally. "Everything holds water. I don't like Moska, but all I can get is drunken driving."

Moska stood up suddenly. "So take my license, who cares? She's dead, damn you all! Can I get out of here now? You know my lawyer!"

Painter nodded. "Any more ideas, Shayne?"

Shayne looked at the small gambler. Moska stared at him. Again Shayne was sure he saw a tiny gleam in the punk's eyes, but there was nothing he could do now.

"No," Shayne said.

"Get out of here, both of you," Painter said.

After they had gone—Moska and the big man, Paul Booher—Painter swiveled in his chair and watched Shayne. The dapper Chief of Detectives was not pleased any more than Shayne.

"I know, Shayne, it's too pat, but it holds. And no matter what we think of Moska, Ruth Moska was his wife. A man doesn't go around covering up for another guy who killed his wife? I mean, why would Moska protect Booher if the big guy killed Ruth Moska? It won't play."

Shayne nodded wearily. "You said there was another car death? Only the woman killed."

Painter shuffled some papers and came up with a sheet. "Name of Jose Jepeda. Reported his wife missing two weeks ago. Last night he says she called him and he went and picked her up. They had some drinks in celebration, and on the way home he wrapped up the car and she was killed. No witnesses, State Police found them about midnight. The woman was dead from multiple skull fractures, Jepeda was barely scratched."

"The same night he found her after two weeks?"

"Yeh," Painter said. "And only his word she called him. I know, it looks fishy, too, but we've got nothing to go on. He lives in Miami, but he was alone with his wife from maybe nine o'clock on last night."

"What does he look like?"

"Big, an ex-prizefighter. Yeh, he

sort of fits Betzer's mystery man, except he's dark-skinned."

"Any connection to the Blue Beach View Hotel?"

"No," Painter said, "and that's our kicker, Shayne. No matter how suspicious you might be, we've still got a dead man, not a woman. We've got a beaten-up hobo in a hotel room, and a missing Mr. John Smith. If your Betzer hadn't thought he saw a woman in that room, there'd be no question right? We'd have a routine drunken manslaughter case, and a routine missing suspect."

"Only Betzer did see a woman —and a big man!"

Painter exploded. "Damn it, Shayne, I've been patient and gone along with you because I wanted you to see your client is seeing visions! You give me one good explanation for the killing of Fred in that room that ties in with anyone except Smith! There isn't a single connection between Jepeda, Booher, Moska, or their women, and either the hotel or Fred! I've checked up and down!"

"There's got to be," Shayne said.

"Get out of here," Painter said, "and be careful! I still can get your license!"

"Give me one more shot," Shayne said.

"What?"

"Let Betzer take a look at the two women accident victims."

Painter shrugged. "Why not? All right, get him down here and we'll settle the damn thing once and for all."

Shayne nodded. The big redhead left the dapper Chief's office. He went straight to the nearest telephone booth in the corridor of Headquarters. He dialed Tim Rourke's number first. The lean reporter was in his office.

"Carl Betzer checks out all the way, Mike," Rourke reported at once. "Nothing more than an accountant, a bachelor, lives alone and simple. He was visiting his friend that night, just as he says. The friend agrees, and there are two other witnesses who saw Betzer in his friend's building."

"All right," Shayne said. "Now I want to know about a man named Paul Booher. He's supposed—"

Rourke broke in. "Paul Booher? I can give you that right now!"

Shayne rubbed his chin in the booth. "How come?"

"We just wrote up a piece on him, Mike. A car accident last night. Booher is news. He's a rich boy from Connecticut, all the money in the world. Inherited a couple of textile plants, a couple of million dollars, and a weakness for gambling and women. He comes down here three or four times a year to live it up. His accident rated page three and a pic. A woman was killed, and—" Rourke stopped.

"Yeh," Shayne said, "a woman was killed. Okay, Tim, now see

what we have on Pete Moska and a man named Jose Jepeda. Jepeda had an accident last night too. Was he written up?"

"Not that I know of, Mike," Rourke said from the far end of the line. "I'll check."

"I'll get back to you," Shayne said.

He hung up and dialed the number of Carl Betzer's apartment. He did not believe Pete Moska at all, and if Betzer could identify Ruth Moska, he might be able to prove Moska a liar. The phone rang a long time. At last a voice answered. It was Max Green. Green was excited.

"Yeh?" Green snapped.

"Mike Shayne, Max," Shayne said, "let me talk to Betzer."

"I wish I could," Max Green said. "He ain't here, Mike."

"Not there? I told you—"

Green cut him off. "You told me to guard him, Mike, not to watch him! He gave me the slip!"

Shayne tugged hard on his earlobe in the silence of the small telephone booth. If there had been anyone there to see, they would have seen the surprise in his grey eyes.

"You mean he ducked out on you?" Shayne said slowly.

"That's what I mean, damn it," Green swore. "He went to get a beer and left me sitting in the living room. There was a back door. You never told me I had to watch him."

"I didn't know you had to," Shayne said bluntly. "You're sure he wasn't snatched?"

"I ain't an amateur, Mike. That back door was locked inside, I checked it out first thing," Green said. "And there *is* a guy following him, only he's still here! He's across the street now! Our boy just flew the coop."

"What does the tail on him look like?" Shayne asked.

"Like a hood. Medium size, dark, with a big bulge under the arm, and a mean look," Green said. "Besides, I know him. Name's Cosmo Vitale. It mean anything?"

Cosmo Vitale! One of Pete Moska's 'friends', and a player in last night's very convenient poker game.

"Yeh, Max, it means plenty. Watch Vitale, and stay around in case Betzer comes back. Okay?"

"Will do, Mike. Sorry I lost him, but you never—"

"I know, Max, it's my fault. You just hang with it."

Shayne hung up. In the silent telephone booth he tugged on his left ear. Cosmo Vitale! Now he was sure Moska was mixed up in something besides a car accident. But what? And why had Carl Betzer ducked out on his protection?

Only a few hours ago Betzer had been crying for protection, scared out of his wits. What had happened? Where had the ac-

countant gone? One thing Shayne was now sure of. Pete Moska had something more he could have told. Maybe Ray Incavo could tell him something about that.

## VI

*The Silver Dollar* was a plush layout three miles outside Miami. Incavo was not there when Shayne strode into the elegant bar and night club section. The detective told Incavo's musclemen that he would wait. It was already late afternoon, and the single girls beginning to arrive to take their nightly seats at the bar where they waited for the men who would pick them up.

Incavo came in nervously a half an hour later. The fat gambler motioned for Shayne to follow him into his private office. Two of the musclemen planted themselves on each side of the door.

"All right, Shayne, what this time?" Incavo said.

The fat gambler was seated behind his enormous desk. Shayne did not like Incavo, but the gambler was an honest gambler. Shayne tossed the souvenir silver dollar onto the desk. Incavo looked at it casually.

"So I advertise this joint, so what?" Incavo said.

"So it might connect you to murder," Shayne said.

The musclemen moved at the door. Incavo waved them back

like trained dogs. The fat gambler began to sweat, mopping his face in the late afternoon sunlight through the windows.

"Might doesn't mean much," Incavo said. "I stopped giving these dollars out a year ago."

"Tell me about Paul Booher," Shayne said.

"A good customer. He loses with a smile. He wins good, too. He's a good gambler, Shayne. He's got all the money you need, but he plays it close and he wins as often as he loses. For a rich boy, he plays it close to the vest. He's no sucker."

Shayne remained silent for a moment, his brow creased in thought. Incavo liked what he called 'class', and had big offices like this in all his clubs.

"Does he drink big?" Shayne asked.

"Sometimes, not much. I hear he doesn't hold it too good," Incavo said.

"What about Pete Moska?"

"A punk," Incavo said. "I try to keep him out, but he has ways. He even uses his wife, they tell me. The creep!"

Shayne sat up straight in his chair. "His wife? Ruth Moska?"

"Yeh, Ruthie. A nice chick, if you like that type."

"How does he use her? For what?" Shayne snapped.

Incavo sweated more. The fat man mopped his face and looked uncomfortable. Then Incavo shrugged.

"Look, Shayne, I try to run a clean joint, you know that. In my places you get a good drink, good food, a little fun, and the games are honest."

"Get to the story," Shayne said drily. "I know the commercial."

Incavo nodded. "Okay. Well, customers like pretty girls. It's part of the trade. I let the girls sit around, you know? I let my headwaiter handle it. We keep it quiet and clean. Only Pete Moska, he runs a business, if you know what I mean."

"Bar-girls?"

"Yeh, and maybe more. I hear things. They say guys get rolled with Moska's girls sometimes. I try to keep him out, but he even uses his wife! I've seen Ruthie at my bar a lot. She meets nice men, you know? How a guy can let his own wife do that, I'm damned if I can figure it out. He was in jail until six months ago."

"Did she meet Paul Booher?" Shayne demanded.

"Ruthie? Hell, I don't know. Why?"

"She's dead."

"Ruthie's dead? How the—"

"A car accident," Shayne said. "Does Moska drink a lot?"

"No," Incavo said. "He hardly touches the stuff."

"I want to know about last night. Did Ruthie go out with Paul Booher and at what time?"

Incavo flicked on his intercom and ordered the headwaiter to come in. There was a short wait in the quiet office. The two musclemen stood like statues on either side of the door. Shayne thought they looked like large bookends and he smiled at his own thought. Incavo was not smiling. Shayne had an idea that the fat gambler did not believe in car accidents happening to Pete Moska's wife any more than Shayne did now.

The headwaiter came in. Incavo told the man what Shayne wanted to know. The headwaiter nodded promptly.

"Of course, sir. I keep an eye on the girls. Yes, Ruthie went out with Mr. Booher about ten o'clock."

"Not nine o'clock?" Shayne snapped.

"No sir, nearer ten," the headwaiter said.

"Was he drunk?"

"Yes sir. He rarely leaves the gambling if he's sober."

Incavo put in, "that's true, Shayne. Booher quits the gambling if he gets drunk. I remember now."

"And he was drunk last night?" Shayne asked.

"He was," the headwaiter said. "He left his car here. Ruthie drove him in her car, I think."

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. "Was he a loser last night?"

"No, a winner. Rather big, I think," the headwaiter said.

Shayne considered. Except for the time, the story fitted with Moska's story of the car accident. There was nothing to make it sound fake, except that Paul Booher did not gamble when drunk. The big playboy had been drunk last night, and yet Moska said there had been a private game. There was still nothing to connect either Moska or Booher to the dead tramp, old Fred.

"Do you know if Booher or Moska had a connection with an old hobo named Fred?" Shayne asked.

"Old Fred?" Incavo said. "No, I wouldn't think so, Shayne. Old Fred is kind of a fixture around the Beach, but Booher's from out of town, and Moska wouldn't give a dying man the right time. Moska's mean and stupid."

"He *was* a fixture," Shayne said. "He's dead, too."

"Old Fred? Why, the poor old guy," Incavo said. Then the fat gambler's eyes narrowed. "You think the two deaths are connected, Shayne?"

"That's the big question," Shayne said. "You haven't helped much. I had hoped that maybe Moska and Booher were total strangers."

"Moska and Booher?" Incavo said. "As far as I know, Shayne, they were. I never heard of them knowing each other. Booher liked the big houses like this. We keep punks like Moska out if we can. Anyway he just got out of jail. Ruth used to come alone, practically all the time."

Shayne blinked. "But Ruthie and Booher? I mean—"

"She worked the bar, Shayne, I told you. Booher just picked her up last night," Incavo said, and looked up at his headwaiter. "You ever see Ruthie with Booher before?"

"No sir," the headwaiter said. "In fact, I'm sure she just met him last night. He was drunker than usual and left the tables earlier. Ruthie was usually gone when he quit. No, I'm sure she never talked to him before last night."

"Could you swear to that?" Shayne snapped.

"You mean in court, sir?" the headwaiter said. "No, I'm afraid

not. I can't prove it, if that's what you mean."

"But you're pretty sure Ruthie just picked up Booher here in the bar last night?" Shayne said.

"Yes, sir, I am," the headwaiter said.

Shayne stood up. "Thanks, Incavo. I'll do my best to keep your place out of it if it turns out to be trouble."

"Thanks, Shayne," the fat gambler said. "I'll keep my ears open for you."

Shayne nodded and turned to leave. The two musclemen stepped aside. He walked through the door and out to his car. The late afternoon sun was low to the west of the highway in front of the elegant roadhouse.

Shayne sat in his car and smoked a slow cigarette. He was sure now that there was something going on that stank to heaven, but he was still not quite sure what it was. Like that death room at the Blue Beach View, the whole affair *felt* wrong. But to be sure, he decided to check out Jose Jepeda, the other man whose wife had died last night.

Before he went to visit the bereaved ex-prizefighter, he decided to check in with Max Green once more. He was beginning to be worried about Carl Betzer. It looked like the accountant was in something very deadly. He stopped at another roadhouse and called Betzer's apartment. Max Green answered almost at once this time.

"He's back, Mike," Green said. "Says he had to go to his office. He's acting funny, Mike, and he's lying."

"You're sure?" Shayne said.

"Yeh."

"All right, I'll talk to him," Shayne said. "But first you bring him over to the Beach and Painter's office. I want him to look at some bodies."

"We're on our way," Green said. "and this time I stick like glue."

"I'll meet you there," Shayne said.

The redhead jumped back into his car and drove fast into Miami, through, and across the Causeway into Miami Beach. It was evening by the time he arrived, parked, and strode into Painter's office. Green, Carl Betzer, and Painter were waiting for him. Betzer seemed nervous, and Painter was irritable.

"Let's get this over," Painter said.

"Right now," Shayne said.

Painter led the way along the corridors and down the stairs to the Miami Beach morgue. The morgue attendant nodded when he was told what bodies Painter wanted to view.

Shayne walked beside Betzer to the first morgue drawer the attendant pulled out. The Chief turned back the sheet that cov-

ered the body. The woman was badly smashed up. The name on the drawer was Stella Jepeda.

Betzer looked at the dead woman. "No, that's not like the woman. She was—taller, yes, and lighter haired."

Shayne nodded. He motioned to Painter. The Chief ordered the attendant to open the next drawer. Shayne pushed Betzer forward. Shayne held Betzer's thin arm as he pushed the accountant before him to the second grim morgue drawer. The attendant pulled back the sheet.

This woman had been almost beautiful. Her face was battered and bruised, but not as badly as the poor Jepeda woman. Ruthie Moska had been a tall girl, dark-haired, and with a beautiful body. She had deserved to die better than this, to end up better than on a morgue slab. Shayne looked at her and saw the thin film of powder around her waist.

"Baby powder," the morgue attendant said, "she used it under girdles, I guess. A good many dames do."

Shayne turned to Betzer. "This is the woman, right? This is the one you saw."

Betzer looked straight down at the remains of Ruth Moska. Then the accountant looked away.

"I never saw her before," Betzer said. "No, not her. I— I never saw her, that woman."

Shayne roared. "You're lying! Damn you, I know that's the woman. All right, you didn't get a good look, but doesn't this woman look just about right?"

Betzer was pale. "No. The woman I saw was—blonde. Yes, she was blonde. Anyway it was dark, and I—"

Painter shrugged. "Put them away, and release the bodies to relatives," the Chief said to the attendant. Then Painter faced Shayne. "Had enough, Shayne?"

Shayne looked at Betzer. "He's lying."

"Why?" Painter said. "Why would he lie?"

"I don't know," Shayne said as he watched Carl Betzer start up the stairs from the morgue. Max Green went right behind the accountant.

Painter snorted. "You're on a hobby-horse, Shayne. You've got a fixation. Let it alone. Betzer's got more sense. Pretty soon he'll get around to admitting to the world that he really isn't sure of what he saw!"

Shayne said nothing. He only paused long enough in Painter's office to tell Max Green to stay with Betzer. Then he left. He could hear the laughter of Peter Painter echoing behind him.

In his car he drove across the causeway and straight to his apartment. He poured four fingers of the best Martel cognac, sat down in the dark, and began to think.

## VII

It came to him at three-thirty in the morning. He had gone over everything in his mind, over and over all night as he sipped his cognac. And then he saw. The bed! The large double bed in the death room. And what was wrong with that death room. The bed was the tip-off. Shayne finished his cognac and went to sleep.

In the morning, another fine sunny morning, he faced Tim Rourke across the desk in his private office.

"I went over everything I knew, Tim, and then I got it. The bed in that room! It was a large double bed and it had been used, slept in, *by two people!* This morning I sent Lucy over for one of Painter's pictures of the room. Take a look."

The redhead tossed the large print onto Tim's desk. Rourke picked it up. The lean reporter studied it for a time. Then Rourke nodded.

"Both pillows used, two people used it," Rourke agreed. "You can see the outlines on the sheets. I'd say one person was smaller, much smaller."

"Right," Shayne said. "A man and a woman! Tell me, Tim, can you make a case out of a man inviting a bum up to his room for a drink and then sharing the bed?!"

"It'd be hard to buy," Rourke said. "But possible, I guess."

"But a woman," Shayne said, and leaned forward. "Let's take what we have. Betzer passes a window at about ten forty-five. He sees a fight, a big man beating a woman. There's plenty of blood. But he's scared, so he walks away. Then he gets an attack of public spirit, and finally calls the cops. He has to wait. By the time Painter gets him and reaches that room more than a half an hour has passed. They find a stiff, all right, and plenty of blood—but the stiff is a man, a poor old bum named Fred.

"Then Betzer finds he's being followed. He gets scared and calls me in. I go to work. I find a room that is all wrong. I couldn't put my finger on it, but it was cockeyed. It looked like no one lived in it, the guy who supposedly owns it is missing. A man named John Smith we can't find out anything about. Just about no one ever saw John Smith. So we have a room lived in by a man we can't find, and the room looks like no one lived in it!"

"Maybe no one did," Rourke said slowly. "Maybe there is no John Smith. Only if so, who did use that room? I mean, *someone* paid the rent on it. There were clothes and things. A man was dead. There were cigarettes. Two glasses had been used."

Shayne nodded. He stood up and began to pace. His heavy eyebrows were knitted fiercely

with concentration. His long stride carried him rapidly back and forth across the silent room.

"No one *lived* in it, Tim, but it was *used!*" Shayne said. "Let's look at the other half of our little puzzle a minute. While Betzer was seeing what everyone says he didn't see, Pete Moska, Paul Booher, and Ruthie Moska were having an accident. Get the time, about the same time but maybe a half an hour to an hour later. No one saw the accident. But Ruthie is dead and Booher is banged up. A very convenient accident.

"Think about it. And Ray Incavo says Pete Moska rarely drinks. Incavo's men also say Paul Booher and Ruthie left maybe an hour *later* than Moska says they started the game. To top it off, Moska implied that he knew Booher, but Incavo's headwaiter is sure Ruthie only picked him up that night. He was drunk, and he likes the women. And Booher fits Betzer's description. A very damned convenient accident!"

Rourke nodded slowly. "Okay, Mike, what did happen? You said you have it figured out."

Shayne paced the quiet, sunny office. "I do, Tim. It's as clear as crystal. I don't know the details, I suppose only Booher does, and Moska, but I've got the outline. That bed in the death room was the thing. It cleared up the odd things about that room. Like I said, it was *used* but not lived in. That is Pete Moska's business, he runs a stable of Bar-girls, and his wife was one of them. The room was where she took her men!

"She picked up Paul Booher that night at *The Silver Dollar.* He was roaring drunk, and he was loaded because he had won. She drove him to the Blue Beach View Hotel. It's a respectable hotel. Moska probably wanted a room in that kind of hotel because it's safer. Moska rented and paid for that room. That was why no one saw much of John Smith. Moska is John Smith, disguised a little to fool the clerk and a few guests who might see him.

"Anyway, that was why the room looked unlived in—it wasn't lived in, just used from time to time by Ruth Moska for her pick-ups. You know the racket. She gets them to the room, and waits until they pass out, or drugs them with a new drink if they don't pass out quick enough. Then Moska appears and after rolling them he carts them off and dumps them. When they come to they're too ashamed to complain, and they probably don't know where they were taken anyway.

"So Ruthie picked up Paul Booher and took him to that room. They had a drink. But something went wrong. Booher didn't pass out enough. He's a big man, and Incavo says he can't hold his booze. Maybe he gets wild. Whatever it was, when Ruthie went to

take his money he caught her and they battled. She was killed—and that is what Betzer saw.

"After Booher killed her, Moska showed up. I know punks like Moska. Maybe he was mad at first. His wife was dead, he had the killer. But Paul Booher would tell him about Betzer seeing the whole thing. Moska is a punk, but not a fool. He had a killing on his hands. If he turned in Booher his whole con-game racket would come out. Besides, Booher is rich! I figure Moska saw his chance.

"Paul Booher knew he had been seen, and the room was a bloody mess. Moska offered to 'fix' it—for a price, a big price I figure. Booher went along. They got Ruthie out of there and faked the accident to cover her death and Booher's scratches and bruises. They even broke Booher's arm to make it look better. Or maybe Moska did that in his first fit of anger. After all, she *was* his wife." Shayne's laugh was almost grotesque.

Rourke nodded. The lean reporter could imagine the kind of love Moska would have for anyone. Shayne was saying that Moska saw his wife dead, and made a deal to protect her killer—for a good price. But, then, Moska had used his wife as a B-girl anyway!

"A nice man," Rourke said.

"Even nicer," Shayne said. "You see, he could cover the killing and Booher's bruises, but the room was a mess. And Betzer had witnessed the killing. Betzer had gone, but there was no way to be sure the cops wouldn't be there any minute. Betzer would report a woman being killed. The room would prove it, and Ruthie and Booher had been seen together. If the cops found an empty room, they would look for a dead woman! If they dug deep enough, it could all come out."

"So?" Rourke said.

"So he needed a corpse! He gave the cops a dead body—old Fred. That way, the police would have a body, an explanation of what Betzer saw, and a John Smith to look for. It would be easier, and a lot more logical, to

believe that Betzer had just seen wrong. With any luck, Ruthie and Paul Booher would never be connected to that room. And it worked. Painter has a corpse, he thinks Betzer just made a mistake, and he's looking for John Smith."

Shayne paced and his voice was bitter, angry. He looked hard at Rourke in the sunny office. "He's done it, Moska has, Tim. I *know* what happened, but I can't prove a word of it! Not until I get one thing—a concrete connection between Moska, Paul Booher, and old Fred the hobo! I know, but there's no way to prove it!"

There was a long silence in the quiet office. Shayne had stopped now, and was standing staring out the high window at Miami spread out below in the sun. Rourke sat in silence, his eyes on the floor. The lean reporter seemed puzzled. After a time, Rourke looked up at Shayne.

"Too bad Betzer couldn't identify Ruth Moska," Rourke said, scowling.

"Green thinks he's lying," Shayne said without turning around, his broad back still facing Rourke.

"Why?"

"Scared, maybe. They probably got to him," Shayne said. "He was gone for some hours."

Rourke nodded slowly. Then he began to rub his chin. His eyes were still puzzled.

"One thing, Mike," Rourke said slowly. "Moska only had a few minutes that night, a half hour at best. How did he happen to find old Fred the hobo just at the right time?"

For a long minute Shayne seemed as immobile as a stone statue where he stood with his back to the reporter. Then he turned around. He turned slowly, very slowly. His eyes were bright. When he spoke, his voice was low and as hard as steel.

"That's it, Tim! You've got it!" the gaunt detective said. "Moska must have *known* old Fred, *known* just where to find him right then! There wasn't time to look. He must have had Fred right there. Maybe Fred was part of his whole racket! That's the weak link. That manager, Rawson, said Fred worked around the hotel at times. Moska must have been using him for something."

The detective started for the door. He reached for his panama. "Tim, you get Max Green and tell him to keep Betzer tight in his place. I want to talk to some hoboes."

Shayne strode from his office without another word. His mind was already working, wondering exactly what Fred had done for Pete Moska's gang, and if old Fred's friends would know. Shayne was thinking so hard he did not even answer Lucy Hamilton when she spoke to him as he went out toward the elevators.

## VIII

THE AREA WAS a wide waste of marsh and sand far on the outskirts of the city. The wrecks of old automobiles littered the edge of the water, and tall wooden pilings leaned against the flat and desolate sky. Birds flew, their raucous cries echoing in the empty waste of sand and reeds. Far off there were boats on the water. On the distant highway the cars moved rapidly past, going north and south.

Shayne parked his car at the end of the sandy side road. He got out and saw them, six ragged men crouched on the sand. They were all huddled over a fire, even in the hot sun. Something steamed in a can on the fire. They all looked up warily as the big redhead left his car and began to walk toward them. Two got up and glided away, vanished into the tall reeds. The other four sat unmoving.

Shayne stood near the fire and looked down at them. Two were poking at the fire with long sticks. The third was staring into the fire, crooning some low song to himself, his eyes vacant. The fourth, a slim, dark man younger than the others, looked up at Shayne but went on stirring the steaming stew pot.

"I'm looking for George," Shayne said.

"We're all looking for something," the slim man said without taking his eyes from the steaming pot.

"They said all tramps were philosophers," Shayne said. "I never believed them."

"Not all, Mr. Shayne, just the lucky ones," the slim man said, and smiled up at Shayne.

"You know me?"

"I know you," the hobo said, peering through the steam into his stew. "I was a court clerk once. We all have our sad stories. I'll spare you mine."

"I'm looking for a very sad story," Shayne said. "Even bums get murdered."

The slim man nodded. "Old Fred? Too bad about that I told Fred he would come to no good working honestly for small favors."

"What about George? He identified the body," Shayne said.

"George is foraging at the moment," the slim man said. "This elegant stew needs an onion. George is in charge of onions today. He has so far failed to appear. He knows better than to return without his onion. Still, the stew is almost done; I expect him soon. Meanwhile, I can probably tell you anything you want to know."

Shayne squatted on his heels near the fire. The stew actually smelled almost delicious. The vacant-eyed hobo still crooned to himself. Shayne traced a pattern in the sand near the fire.

"Tell me about Pete Moska," Shayne said.

"Moska?" the slim man said. "What about him?"

"You know him then?" Shayne snapped.

"Of course, by name and reputation," the slim man said. "A true punk, a tramp of the soul. He purveys women, even his wife. Like most men of his ilk, he made the women work while he took the money. A clever man, though, and careful. His victims never complained, and his women operate with great discretion."

"Did Fred work for him? Honest work for small favors?" Shayne quoted.

"Fred? No, not that I know. Moska is not the kind of man to be friendly to tramps. Moska would sell his brother for a ten dollar bill. Men who worship money hate tramps, Shayne. Tramps bother them, make them uneasy. Tramps reject money and power, you see?"

"But Fred must have known Moska," Shayne persisted. "They must have done some work together. Maybe he ran some errands for the guy."

"It could be, but I doubt it. Fred was a gentle man, not Moska's type."

Shayne squatted on his heels and tugged on his left earlobe. The stew smelled better every minute. The two men who had vanished had returned as silently as they had gone. The slim man had somehow signalled them that Shayne was okay.

"What about Ruth Moska then?" Shayne said. "Did Fred work for her at any time?"

"I never heard if he did," the slim man said. "I think Fred would have run fast from anything connected to a man like Pete Moska."

Shayne traced another pattern in the sand. His eagerness was draining away. When Tim Rourke had mentioned that Moska must have known Fred, he had been sure that was the key. Now he was not sure. He *knew* he had worked out the events of that night correctly, but there was no way to prove it.

Shayne looked up and out across the water that glistened flat in the sun. Moska had done too good a job. And yet, if he was right about what had happened, there had to be a connection between Fred and Moska. Fred was the perfect substitute victim—a tramp no one could trace to anyone—the kind of old man killed every day in petty squabbles over pennies or a glass of beer. It could not have been pure chance. And yet, if—.

"There's George now," the slim tramp said.

Shayne turned. An old man was limping along the road. The hobo stared uneasily at Shayne's car as he passed it, but he saw his friends still squatting around the fire and the stew pot, and he came on.

When he reached the fire he held up two onions and grinned a toothless grin.

"In with them," the slim man said. "Good work, George. A stew without an onion isn't a stew. This is Mike Shayne, he wants to talk to you about Fred. You knew him better than we did."

"Fred?" the old hobo cackled. "Salt o' the earth. Never should of hung around that place. Killed him sure. Best friend I had. Damn fool, too."

"What place?" Shayne said quickly.

"Eh? Place? Oh, yeh, killed him it did. I told him to stay away. Never take no favors, see? You take favors, you got to give back, see? Never should of taken drinks from that guy."

"Drinks? From who, George?" Shayne whispered. "Drinks from John Smith?"

"Don't know no Smith," George said.

Shayne sighed as he squatted there near the fire. The old hobo was eccentric.

"What place did Fred hang around?" Shayne said slowly.

"That hotel, where else?" old George said. "Always hangin' around. Free booze, that did it."

"He did odd jobs around the Blue Beach View?" Shayne asked.

"Yeh, and had a place to sleep, too. Storeroom down in the basement," George said. "The feller would give him a bottle, cheap pint that's all, and he'd sleep it off down there."

Shayne's mind was racing again. Old Fred had often slept in the hotel's cellar! Which meant that he was probably there that night, drunk, and asleep!

"What guy, George?" Shayne said softly.

"Guy? Oh, that clerk! The Linder feller. Liked to have Fred around, made him run errands and all that. He let Fred sleep in that storeroom. The manager he don't know. Fred told me he had to hide and be quiet. But he got a bottle free, so he hung around."

Shayne stood up. The detective gazed off across the sandy waste of reeds and smooth water. There it was. The real answer. Jacob Linder, the night clerk. It was Linder who knew that Fred was in the cellar and certainly drunk. A perfect substitute corpse. Maybe they had not intended to kill Fred, but they had to hit him, bloody him up, and he just died. It did not matter, the result was the same now.

And Shayne should have known, guessed. Jacob Linder. It was obvious now. Moska could not have used the room in the hotel without Linder. There would be noise, and Linder would cover. The girls had to bring the men into the hotel, even if they used the back entrance, and it could not have been done without Linder being part of the act.

The room had to be rented at Moska or a confederate. And Linder was necessary to cover that, to invent a John Smith and tell the manager that he saw Smith from time to time. The other guests who said they had seen Smith had probably seen Moska, or had had some complete stranger pointed out as Smith by Linder.

Now the final link was in place —the odd *feel* of the room. Half lived in and half not lived in. The fact that there had been men's clothes but nothing else in that room. The clothes were part of the frame-up. Clothes hastily put in the room to be found by the police. But in their haste they had forgotten about the almost empty medicine cabinet, the unused bathroom, and the unused dishes.

One ashtray washed because it had contained cigarette butts used by a woman—butts with lipstick. The other left because it had been used only by the man on his side of the bed. A quick, hurried frame-up, as it had had to be. Linder remembered Fred, and that gave them a victim. The clothes, of course, would be Linder's own clothes.

That was why the mythical John Smith had been described as small and blond—Linder was small and blond! Shayne remembered the glimpse he had had of the small, blond man who had hit him in the room. Painter had told him that it was Linder who had hit him!

There had been no time to be fancy, with the police perhaps arriving at any time. So Linder had planted his own clothes and described John Smith as being like himself. That way the clothes, when studied in a police lab, would fit the description of John Smith.

Considering the haste necessary, the spur-of-the-moment nature of the whole scheme, it had been a good job. But now Shayne knew the weak link—Jacob Linder. The reason, of course, had been money. And that made Linder a very weak link.

Shayne turned on his heel and began to walk away toward his car. It would not be long before Pete Moska might wonder about how weak Linder was.

"Come again, Mr. Shayne," the slim hobo said.

Shayne turned back. He tossed a ten dollar bill toward the slim man and old George. He smiled as he offered the money.

"Thanks, and buy more onions," Shayne said.

The slim man nodded. Shayne turned again and walked across the sand to his car. He got into the car and drove toward the highway back into Miami. Now he had all the facts, and needed only the tangible proof. He would get that from Carl Betzer. This time the scared accountant would tell

the truth and identify Ruth Moska. When Shayne told him the whole story, Betzer would tell the truth. After that, Shayne would confront Jacob Linder.

Shayne drove slowly until he found a tavern. He went inside to call Max Green at Betzer's place. The telephone rang. It rang and rang. There was no answer. Shayne dialed again. Still no answer. He hung up and walked quickly to his car. Betzer lived in an apartment house on the north side of Miami. It was not far. Shayne drove fast and straight to the apartment.

Max Green opened the door when he rang. The stocky Green was bloody. There was a long gash on his forehead. His suit was torn. But it was not his own injuries that made Green look so pale. The stocky man motioned Shayne into the room and pointed.

## IX

CARL BETZER lay dead on the living room floor of the small apartment.

"He sapped me," Green said. "When I came to, there he was. He hit me himself, from behind, and when I woke up he was dead —shot!"

Shayne strode to the body. He bent down. Carl Betzer was dead, definitely. The accountant had been shot twice in the heart at very close range. Probably a silenced gun. Shayne stood up and looked at Max Green who had slumped into a chair.

"He hit you himself?"

"Yeh, out of the blue, about an hour ago. He must have shoved me into a closet. I woke up in a closet. Probably saved my life, Mike."

"Yes," Shayne said. "They would probably have killed you, too. You saw or heard nothing?"

"Not even the shots. I figure it happened quick after I was sapped. They must have come right in, or *he* came right in. I don't know if it was one or two or more."

"He let them in?" Shayne said speculatively.

Green nodded. "That's the way I figure it, Mike. Why else would he sap me himself? He wanted me out of the way. It was a meet, Mike. A planned meeting."

"Arranged when he slipped you yesterday."

"It has to be that way," Max Green said, "and I think I can give you who and why."

Shayne cocked a bushy red eyebrow. "Go ahead, give."

Green reached into the pocket of his bloody jacket. The stocky private detective took out a clipping torn from a newspaper. He held it out to Shayne. It was the story of Moska and Booher's accident. There was a good, full-length picture of Paul Booher.

"He had it on him," Green ex-

plained. "I found it after I woke up and searched the body. It's from yesterday's morning paper, Mike. He must have torn it out yesterday."

Shayne looked at the clipping. He remembered now that Rourke had told him about the story and the picture.

"He had it before he slipped you yesterday," Shayne said.

"It figures like that," Max Green said. "That's why he changed. He didn't want me around."

"That's why he wouldn't identify the body," Shayne said. "They hadn't gotten to him; he went to them! He saw the picture of Paul Booher, recognized it, saw a woman had been killed, and guessed just as I did. He read that Booher was rich! And our meek accountant became a lion. He decided to get into the act and blackmail Paul Booher!"

Green nodded. "That's my idea. It explains a lot. The poor fool smelled money! He probably contacted Booher, the rich man wouldn't be hard to find at one of our hotels. The story in the paper said he was an out-of-towner."

"And Booher contacted Moska. They set up a meet. Poor stupid Betzer sapped you and opened the door like a lamb. They must be laughing!"

"The only witness," Green said.

Shayne narrowed his grey eyes into hard points like steel.

"They must feel pretty safe now," Green said. "They've done a good job. Damn me, I should have guessed. Ater he slipped from me yesterday, the tail never showed again. When he came back, they stopped following us. I should have seen it!"

"So should I," Shayne said, "but maybe it isn't all bad. Betzer was a stupid fool, I'm not sorry for him, Max. A greedy fool who saw a fast buck and didn't care how he got it. Only it gives us some openings. They used a gun this time, and guns can be traced."

"Maybe, Mike, they know what they're doing," Green said.

Shayne tugged slowly on his ear. "They must have made a deal, Max. They were going to pay him off. Only they killed him."

"Guys like Moska work that way," Green said.

"Yes," Shayne said, "I think I might convince someone else of that now. Betzer wasn't the only witness, Max. He wasn't the only one to make a deal with Moska. Maybe Moska has made a big mistake. It might have been a lot cheaper to pay Betzer what he wanted."

"You need me, Mike?" Green asked. "I blew this one and I don't like to blow them."

"You take care of that head, Max," Shayne said, "but you can do me one job. Call Painter and tell him to get over to the Blue

Beach View—Jacob Linder's room. Only give me about a half an hour before you call."

"Will do, Mike. A half an hour."

"That should do it, Max, one way or the other," Shayne said grimly. "You can call Will Gentry too, about Betzer's body. But take your time."

"I'll handle it, Mike."

Shayne nodded and strode from the small apartment of the dead accountant. Greed was a terrible thing, the redhead thought as he walked out into the afternoon sun. A simple, ordinary man who only did his duty and reported a possible murder—and greed made him as bad as any killer. Greed that had killed him as it always did when it went too far.

For Betzer greed had proven stronger than fear when the accountant had seen a sudden opportunity. In his car Shayne hoped that for the more sophisticated Jacob Linder fear would prove stronger than greed. Betzer had been a poor babe in dangerous woods. Linder knew the danger much better. Shayne was counting on that.

IT WAS JUST before two-thirty in the afternoon when Mike Shayne arrived at the rear entrance to the Blue Beach View Hotel. He left his car a block away and entered the hotel on foot. He moved as silent as a cat to a point in the dark rear hall from where he could look through a small archway to the hotel desk. The manager was counting the cash preparatory to turning over the desk to Linder at three P.M.

As Shayne watched, the manager finished his counting, and closed the cash drawer. Then the tall, black-suited man looked at his watch and opened a cooler of soft drinks that stood behind the desk. He closed the cooler, picked up some keys, and walked from behind the desk and down the stairs into the cellar.

Shayne glided silently to the desk and checked the roster of rooms. Jacob Linder was on the second floor, rear. Room 2-M. Shayne turned and was across the lobby and up the stairs before the manager had taken more than a step back up the cellar stairs. Shayne moved quickly along the second floor corridor until he came to room 2-M.

There was noise in the room. Linder, as Shayne had expected, was preparing to go on duty. Shayne knocked. The door opened. The small, blond night clerk stared at Shayne. The gaunt redhead pushed his way into the room.

Linder protested. "You get the hell out of here, peeper!" he shouted.

Shayne grinned a wolfish grin as he faced the small, blond man. "You know me? How do you know me? We never met"

"I—read the papers," Linder stammered.

"No," Shayne said. "You frisked me when you slugged me yesterday. You looked me over before you called Painter. Why? Were you afraid I might find something in that room?"

"Mr. Rawson, the manager, sent me to apprehend you. He suggested I search you," Linder said.

"The manager? Is he in on it, too?"

Linder paled. "In on what? I don't know—"

Shayne laughed. "You know, Linder. They couldn't have done it without you. You told them about poor old Fred sleeping off his booze in the cellar."

Shayne went on to tell Jacob Linder exactly what he had guessed, step by step. The night clerk was ashen before Shayne finished. Shayne's grey eyes were cold as steel.

"You were in on the whole racket; you had to be," he said. Moska pays you plenty. Only you know too much, Linder. "It's murder now. How long do you think Moska will pay you now that it's his neck at stake? He paid you because you were useful in his racket. He needed a nice, quiet place for his girls to rob their suckers. When Paul Booher killed Ruthie he needed you to help him cover and bleed Booher dry of a lot of cash. But he doesn't need you now, and now its murder—two murders!"

Linder jumped. "Two—murders?"

"They killed Carl Betzer, Linder. Betzer offered to keep quiet for cash, but they killed him instead. It's safer that way. They figured they'd be real safe with you dead! Think about it. You're the only outsider who knows now! You're it."

"I—" Linder stammered, his hands shaking, his thin neck gulping as if he could not breathe.

"They'll kill you, Jake, as sure as I'm standing here."

The small man slumped into a chair, shaking all over. "What do you want?"

"Just tell the story to Painter. He'll be here soon. That's all. Turn state's evidence and you'll get off light."

In the chair the small man shivered. But he began to nod. His head moved up and down, up and

down. Linder was scared now, and his voice was no more than a croak.

"All right, yes," Linder whispered. "He'll kill me, too. You're right. Only you got to get me out of here."

"Painter will be here; sit tight," Shayne said.

The small man was terrified. "Damn you, they'll be watching me! They probably tailed you! You get me—"

But Shayne had heard the sound in the corridor long before. He had expected Moska and his boys to appear. They would have been watching Betzer's place. They would have been watching Linder. The sound in the corridor was just what Shayne had expected. Now he quickly grabbed Linder and pushed the small man down to the floor behind the bed. Then he leaped for cover behind the door.

The door suddenly opened.

Peter Moska stood there. Moska held an ugly automatic.

But Moska did not fire.

The chunky hood took a half a step, the automatic fell to the floor with a loud clatter, and Pete Moska pitched forward onto his face. A knife stuck out of his back. Shayne stepped out to bend over the dead hood.

"He's dead, Mr. Shayne, and so are you."

Shayne looked up at the silenced pistol in the bony hand of the black-suited manager, Mr. James Rawson.

## X

MIKE SHAYNE stood up and stepped back away from the open door. Rawson stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. The manager held his silenced pistol steady.

"Get up, Linder," Rawson snapped.

Jacob Linder got up. The night clerk brushed his clothes and grinned at the manager. Rawson stared at him stonily.

"You got him, Boss," Linder said. "He figured it all out, everything!"

"Not everything," Shayne said angrily. "I should have. Moska wasn't smart enough."

Rawson neither smiled nor looked angry. His face was impassive, expressionless.

"I was afraid you would figure it out," the manager said. "Not a very good plan, but we had little time. Linder remembered Fred. You were quite right about that, Shayne. In fact you had it all right, as Linder says, except for the small detail about me. Did you really think Moska and Linder could run such a racket in my hotel for a whole year without me knowing it?"

Shayne swore. "That was what I missed, yeh. The time. Moska only got out of jail six months ago, and that silver dollar had been in the room at least a year. So the whole set-up was your idea?"

"It was," Rawson said. "But no one knew it except our late friend Mr. Moska there, and Linder. Now you know. Your mistake will certainly be a very costly one, I'm afraid."

Jacob Linder was eager. "Kill him, Boss. With both him and Moska dead no one'll know!"

Rawson nodded slowly. "How right you are, Linder. Too bad; it was a lovely scheme. All that money Paul Booher was prepared to pay. I'll have to lose that. Booher will probably talk when the police find you all, but he doesn't know of my part in this. It might have worked out if Shayne here hadn't come along. I'll just have to give up the entire racket. But it's safer that way. I'm sorry, Linder."

Linder turned grey again. "You —no—Boss, listen—"

"You know all about it, Linder," Shayne said. "Like I told you, you know too much. You're on the list too."

"Be quiet, Mr. Shayne," Rawson said. "I don't like it messy. I'm not a violent man. This entire unfortunate affair is Paul Booher's fault. He killed Ruthie. I merely saw a chance for big money from Booher. We had to have a body, so Moska killed old Fred. But normally I hate violence. It doesn't pay. Look at all the trouble it has caused me this time."

Shayne tensed his muscles, ready. "Three corpses, Linder. He'll say we killed each other. With you and Moska dead he's in the clear."

"A perfectly good racket ruined by violence," Rawson said sadly as he pulled back the hammer on his pistol. "It may take me years to start another as good and as safe."

"He'll say you and Moska killed me with that pistol he has in his hand," Shayne said to Linder. "Then Moska shot you, and you stabbed Moska. There won't be a trace of evidence against him."

Rawson smiled for the first time. The silenced pistol swung toward Linder. Shayne tensed.

The rest happened all at once. Shayne leaped at Linder to knock him away. Rawson fired once. Shayne felt the bullet crease his shoulder. Linder went down. Shayne tried to regain his balance before Rawson could fire again. There was a second shot and a third.

Rawson swayed and slumped to the floor.

Shayne had his own pistol out now, but he had not fired it. In the open doorway Shayne saw the bandaged but smiling face of Max Green. The stocky Green stepped into the room, his pistol in his fat hand.

"I didn't blow this one, eh?" Max Green said. "I decided you maybe could use some help. I don't like getting paid for cases I blow, Mike."

Shayne grinned. "You just earned your pay, Max. Thanks."

"You could have handled it, Mike."

Shayne looked down at James Rawson. He was clutching at his shoulder and groaning.

"Maybe," Shayne said. "But I'm glad I didn't have to. Get Linder."

Green bent down and hauled the shivering night clerk up by the collar of his suit. Linder shook like a leaf.

Peter Painter finally arrived with his men ten minutes later. Painter stared at the scene of carnage. Mike Shayne began to explain.

IT WAS DARK when Peter Painter finally stood up behind the desk in his office and indicated that Shayne and Green could go. The dapper Chief of Detectives had just put down the telephone.

"All right, that wraps it up," Painter said. "Paul Booher gave them the whole story downstairs. We'll get him on manslaughter, but I'm not sure what else. I'll leave that to the District Attorney. You had it all, Shayne. Booher got drunk. Ruthie picked him up. They went to that room at the hotel. When she thought he was cold, she rolled him for his wad. He woke up and they battled.

"He killed her. Then Pete Moska showed up. Moska was so mad he broke Booher's arm. He might have killed Booher, he was stupid enough, but Linder had called Rawson about the trouble. When Rawson heard there had been an eye-witness, and that Booher was the killer, he got the idea of saving Booher for a price —a good price. Paul Booher's a coward, and an arrogant one at that, so he went for the idea.

"They needed a corpse, like you said, to hoodwink me. Linder remembered Fred in the cellar sleeping off his booze. Moska and his boys killed the old man. Linder faked John Smith with his own clothes—that was Rawson's idea, a clever man. And Rawson will tell it all, too—as soon as he's patched up in the hospital. Linder also cleaned up the room, but he forgot the medicine cabinet, and he never thought to make the place look more convincing as some man's home.

"They hauled Ruthie out and faked the accident. Linder waited for us. It was going to cost Booher a cool quarter of a million as a starter! The arrogant crumb thought his hide was worth it. He swears he didn't know about Fred, just thought they were going to fake the accident. That the DA can work on, too Booher also swears he didn't know about Betzer getting killed. Maybe he didn't, but we'll get him for all we can. It was really all his damned fault!"

Shayne nodded slowly where he sat with the stocky Max Green in Painter's dim but plush office. "Rawson couldn't resist the

chance. He had been working his small rackets for years, Linder says. I missed on Rawson. Incavo practically told me, too. He said Moska was dumb and just out of jail. Ruthie had been working while Moska was inside, which meant some other boss. Then there was that silver dollar. It had to be a year old. I blew that one."

"Lucky for you Green is smart," Painter sneered happily.

"Two detectives are better than one," Max Green said. "Mike is smart and I'm lucky."

"You better hire him, Shayne," Painter leered. "You might live longer."

"Not me," Green said. "I'll go back to my nice, easy divorce cases, thanks."

"One thing still puzzles me," Shayne said. "Why would Betzer risk leaving his bodyguard to contact Paul Booher?"

"That's easy," Painter grunted, as if begrudging the information. "We found out he was in debt and needed cash desperately. He knew that Paul Booher knew where Moska was playing cards, and could contact him at once."

Shayne sighed now and stood up. "We were lucky. After all, it was really Betzer who did the job. An eye-witness is bad for a killer, even a dead one. Too bad he had to get greedy ideas."

The big redhead was going to say something more, and stopped. That was all there was to say—greed. Greed killed Ruthie, Moska, Betzer, and even poor old Fred who could not resist a bottle. And it almost killed Rawson. Greed would send Linder, Booher and Rawson to long prison terms at best. That was all of it this time—Greed.

Shayne nodded to Max Green, and the two men walked out of Painter's office. Shayne steered Green toward the nearest tavern. He wanted a cognac very much. Too much pure greed made a man thirsty.

THE ONLY MAGAZINE featuring MIKE SHAYNE every month

Featuring

# CHIP STACK

# THE CASE OF THE CLEVER CONTESSA

*"She was a flighty dame wearing extremely flighty jewelry. And somehow I was supposed to keep track of both."*

**by TIGHE JARRETT**

CHIP STACK ogled the photo of the bikini-clad contessa and quite forgot that he'd been called in by the austere insurance chief to prevent a suspected fraud, or theft, as the case might be.

"What do you think?" Richard Ramsey asked.

"By comparison, the Naked Goya was drab," Stack murmured fervently. "What a babe!"

"I am talking," Ramsey said coldly, "about a woman who'll wear a thirty-eight thousand dollar string of pearls—*swimming!* The year before, she lost a thirty thousand dollar opal in a hotel powder-room. The year before that, a string of emeralds off a yacht."

"A passion for water," Stack noted, relinquishing the photo with regret.

"Well, there'll be damned little water at the Embassy Ball she's giving," Ramsey snapped. "And this time she will be wearing a hundred and ninety thousand dollar diamond necklace, and her current boy friend is a duke who is head over heels in debt, and been sus-

pected in several insurance frauds."

Chip Stack moved his rolypoly body around the desk to examine the contessa's dossier. "I can't compete with tall young dukes, but if these losses have been collaborated fraud, she's clever for an amateur."

"She's scarcely amateur," Ramsey said. "She's the daughter of one ambassador and wife of another. That's pretty good background for a game of wits. If these diamonds disappear during the ball, we'll have to pay up. There wouldn't be a chance of frisking her guest list."

"You'll have company detectives on hand, of course."

Ramsey snorted. "On the grounds outside and at the reception door, only. At her own stipulation."

"Why would it be necessary for the jewels to disappear during the ball? Why not after the champagne-loaded household has retired?"

"Because her jewels are deposited in the embassy safe when the contessa hits the sack. It is doubtful if even the CIA could get into that particular safe."

Chip Stack popped a cigarette into his mouth and glanced back through the contessa's dossier. There were mentions of her skin diving, sky diving, sailplaning, skiing, mountain climbing, spelunking, speed boat racing and other of the riskier sports, but no mention of any accidents or close calls. She was bold, then, but not reckless. She liked publicity. And handsome, impoverished young men.

"Well, I'll see if I can save her pretty baubles and make a Christian of her for the future," Stack said.

Ramsey shot him a sharp look and tapped the desk nervously. "If you get shot or arrested for theft yourself, we don't know you," the insurance chief warned. "And we don't want her locked up or manhandled."

"That last would be very pleasant," Stack grinned.

On the day of the ball, Stack visited New York's leading hair stylist to have his ordinary wet-slick hair marcelled into a beautifully, natural-looking, masculine wave. At the same time, he had a very dignified set of whiskers attached by the leading theatrical make-up artist. The result was more than handsome, it was distinguished.

He had arranged for a chauffered Rolls Royce to meet his plane in Washington. It was a matter duly reported by the security guard who carried Stack's hand-etched vellum card to the contessa's social secretary.

"But who is he?" the harried secretary asked. She looked again at the card which stated simply:

*Charles Maurice de Stack. Paris—Roma—Madrid.*

"He offered no information, senora, except that he just flew in from Rome and must make proper arrangements for the portrait tonight."

"Portrait? No matter. I'll have to see him if he's this important."

She was still tapping his card on her fingernail, unconsciously admiring its workmanship, as she joined him in a waiting room.

"Ah, senora, you are kind to interrupt at such a busy moment," he bowed. "But it is necessary that I set up my lighting for the portrait in advance."

"Portrait?" she repeated again, puzzled.

He chuckled understandingly and made a Gallic gesture. *"Parbleu!* The word is a vanity, but the only way we can distinguish between what you call the news cheesecake and the true art of the camera."

"Oh. You're a photographer?" the secretary asked.

Stack permitted himself to cringe slightly at her intonation, then drew to his full height with rising indignation as at a slur. *"The Parisian Noblesse* failed to inform you that it had interrupted my audience at the Vatican to rush me here to take a color portrait of your beautiful contessa for its next cover?"

"The *Noblesse,"* she repeated, startled.

It was the most elite, most arrogant of aristocracy's private publications, so exclusive that even subscriptions were limited to invitation. In her whole life, the secretary could not recall a personality cover of anyone below the rank of royalty.

"Monsieur de Stack," she breathed with new respect, "for you, I am sure the contessa will wish to be disturbed. If you will wait but a few moments—"

"For the honor of photographing your contessa, a lifetime would be but a short wait," Stack said gallantly.

"May I tell her your requirements, monsieur?"

"I must have chambers of suitable decor for the gown she will be wearing, and in addition, utter privacy for the sitting."

"I will inform her, monsieur." The secretary flitted off.

In less time than half a cigarette, she was back, breathless. "The contessa bids you welcome and instructs me to say it is an honor to have you come beneath her roof. She has long been one of the most fanatic admirers of your work."

Chip Stack coughed to suppress a laugh. His photo art, to date, had been limited to some rather lewd cheesecake and to pix of jailbirds. The secretary, however, had turned to lead him to various chambers for his selection.

"Unfortunately," she said as

they moved from room to room, "she can grant you only fifteen minutes after the press conference. Even that will allow her but five minutes before the reception."

Chip Stack lifted his hand to say no more. "Under the circumstances, it is the favor of a goddess descending from Olympus."

He didn't know where he found such a lure, but it had got him in. He was beginning to like the pose.

At six-forty, precisely, the contessa peremptorily terminated her audience with the mass of press photographers and appeared in Chip Stack's designated chambers with a retinue, including her current young duke.

Stack was struck motionless, absolutely tongue-tied, staring. In his whole life, he had never seen nor felt the presence of a woman of such exquisite posture, form and beauty. She was like a love passage from Romeo and Juliet, a woman who could only exist in a man's dream. She was something unattainable as a star, yet holding the mystic sensuality of an Egyptian cat.

"Contessa, if Goya's Duchess D'Alba stepped from her frame, she would look a peasant by comparison."

He saw her eyes spark, and she tilted her head a little to study him afresh, knowing that it had been no mere gallant speech, but something that burst out of him, a cry of heartfelt adoration.

The young duke colored at Stack's half-choked tone of worship and said aggressively, "See here, my man—"

The contessa silenced him with a movement of her hand, and without looking at him, said, "Dodo, take the senora and others outside to wait so that I may grant proper humble audience to one of our great artists."

She spoke softly, but under the softness was the rapier steel of autocratic command. Yet in that same moment of arrogance, she stood smiling, partly amused, partly awed by the quite evident sincerity this little rolypoly genius had evidenced.

"Now, Monsieur de Stack," she said graciously as the door closed, "you will honor me by placing me in any pose or mood you feel inspired to."

*Oh, you lousy Brutus!* Chip Stack nearly cried out about himself.

But he was in the soup now. He could not withdraw. Perhaps, by way of retribution, he could save her from notoriety that would be ruinous, however.

Stack had his camera set up on a tripod. It was but a 35 mm, but he had fitted it with an old-fashioned photographer's cowl, presumably for sharper focussing. Actually, the purpose was to conceal a can of fluorescent paste. This paste was colorless, odorless, and had no feel of grease nor grit. Each

time he poked his head beneath the cloth, he would daub his finger tips with this paste, then rush back to make some readjustment of the contessa's pose, also readjusting her diamond necklace on which he'd smear a little of the paste.

"These glittering trinkets," he complained once. "Why hide such beauty of color and texture and the rich full flesh of vitality?"

"You would like me better with nothing—no makeup, even?"

"Ah, contessa, that would be too much beauty even for a man to dream," he whispered, but he did not have quite the same picture in mind that she had.

Cryptic humor twinkled in her eyes.

"Perhaps," she suggested, "I will not be wearing such jewelry the next time that we meet."

He scurried around, adjusting lights and screens. Finally, he was ready to shoot.

"But first, for just a second," he said, "we turn off all the lights. Then they come on again. You must not jump, but it is permissible to blink. Thus, the eyes are brightened the very instant before we shoot."

He flipped the master switch in his hand and the room went utterly black. But unseen, on a shelf above the camera, he had placed an ultra-violet light. This invisible light turned each diamond that he had smeared with paste into a soft, mysterious, green-white glow.

The next instant, he flipped the full floodlights on, triggered five shots in rapid succession, then grabbed another camera to race around, catching the contessa from other angles. There was no slightest play acting in his fervent activity. These were photos he really wanted for his memory book.

So intrigued was the contessa that her secretary knocked a time warning twice before she broke her pose. She was so personal, so gracious in leaving, that for the first time in his blemished life Stack felt lower than a rat.

It was too bad, he considered, to have to break up her little play. Such a beautiful woman was entitled to her peccadilloes. Still, considering that the snide young duke would probably be the beneficiary, there would be a certain satisfaction in preventing another fraud.

Stack now performed a quick change, ripping off his beard, flattening his hair. He took a 35 mm camera, locked his ultraviolet lamp under it so that they operated as a single unit, and made his way to a small balcony over the main ballroom from where electricians were operating the varicolored lights.

A rather neatly forged press card, a flask of Ambassador and a fifty-dollar bill won him the grinning connivance of the electricians. They made room for him to shoot his news pix from the balcony.

CHIP STACK gave the contessa credit. The entire room had been decorated so that the eyes of guests were drawn to the end, where she received. On a closed-off balcony directly behind her had been set an enormous and beautifully lighted aquarium flanked by overhanging fruit trees. The tropical fish had probably cost a small fortune. He would bet that every single fish and stone and plant and light in that tank had been selected for the living frame it created for the contessa's beauty.

Only one thing in the decorative scene was out of harmony. Somehow, a branch of one tree had been bent or broken so that it hung too straight across the tank and jarred the symmetry. But then, through his telescopic sight, Stack caught a second jarring item, this one more surprising as it was not an accident.

In that exquisitely decorated tank, someone had placed a miniature of an ultramodern radar ear, or so it looked at that distance, in place of the traditional Neptune's castle.

By ten-thirty, the champagne had taken hold and the party was feeling no pain. The earlier punctilious dignity was wearing off. The contessa, in fact, was doing a frug with her young duke, who danced like an eel.

Stack kept his camera trained on her necklace, his senses keen now with expectancy. If that necklace were going to vanish at all, this was when it should happen.

But at the end of the dance, almost to Stack's disappointment, the contessa still wore the necklace. The young duke led her back to where her husband stood talking with two other ambassadors, a general, and an under secretary. The younger couple, laughing,

moved a little beyond the ambassador to where the light from the aquarium was brighter.

"Oh, oh," Stack thought. "Now we get it."

She was leaning her shapely shoulder close under the tank, and the duke was fiddling with the necklace chain as if it had caught in her shoulder strap. But after a moment they moved back toward her husband, and her necklace was still brilliantly in place.

A footman came by with a tray of champagne. The contessa started to take a glass, then made a face and said something to her young escort. The duke returned some humorous remark and began winding his way through the throng to a bar buffet set a full hundred feet down the room.

The contessa moved a step closer to her husband's group who broke off their serious talk to pay her court. She was regaling them with some amusing incident when suddenly all the lights went out.

There were the small cries and remarks and hubbub of jokes that accompany such an incident. On Stack's balcony, one of the electricians grunted, "That's funny."

"Power short?" a second asked.

"No. Look through those curtains—the lights are still on in the other wing. But this wing here is on eight different fuses. They couldn't all blow. The only way to cut all the lights here is with the master switch."

Chip Stack was trying to listen to the electricians too hard. He automatically snapped on the ultraviolet lamp, but he didn't get his camera into action until after his naked eye had picked up a string of glowing dots whisking across space and vanishing.

Perhaps thirty seconds later, the lights came back on. The contessa had crowded close to her husband and was holding on to his shoulder. Her duke was down at the far end of the room, wedged behind the crowd that had knotted together when the lights went off. He could not possibly have reached her side and got back to where he stood.

But, the contessa's necklace was now missing.

It was her husband who noticed it and began to search the floor. The ambassador then called to his guests to please look around them, the presumption being that she must have lost it in the dance, even though she was shaking her head and explaining that the young duke had just fixed it for her.

There was now the murmur and tension that comes over a group of important people unduly sensitive to suspicion or scandal. Jewels could show up in very unexpected places. Thieves often planted them on unsuspecting victims as a means of transportation, a well enough known gimmick, but the victim seldom escaped some suspicion and malicious gossip.

The duke had arrived back at the ambassador's group and volunteered to be searched, as did several others. The ambassador was loath to request that of his guests. He had called in the security guards for a more thorough search of the room first, and from training, they were examing the aquarium and the shrubbery and drapes of that balcony first of all.

Something had changed the symmetry of the balcony, however. Stack felt it by instinct more than knew it as fact, perhaps because he'd seen that string of dots whisk off in that direction. He would have given his shirt to investigate that area himself. But his own position was now rather precarious.

He had dropped his disguise, which would put him under immediate suspicion. He was not an invited guest. One look at his cameras would tell any real photographer that he was a fake. An overseas phone call to the magazine he had claimed to represent would ascertain that. He could, of course, prove that he was Chip Stack, a freelance insurance investigator, but what he was doing there would still be difficult to explain. He was hired on the basis of never involving the insurance company, and the regular insurance detectives had no love for a freelance.

He decided wisdom was the better part of valor. Nodding thanks to the electricians, he backed off the balcony. He was able to move down the stairway without attracting attention, and back to his suite, where he let himself out by a french door.

Ordinarily, there would have been guards on duty at the front of the building. But the outside guards had apparently been called inside to watch the entrance doors and ballroom. Stack moved out the gate, hailed a cab, and drove to a photographer friend to develop the ultraviolet film.

As soon as he could make out the negative, Stack began to grin. Not only the fluorescent blobs on the necklace had shown, but the whole necklace was clear, jerking through the air higher than a man could reach.

And the contessa was moving away from the balcony, toward her husband's group, her beautiful left hand at her throat—so she already realized the necklace was gone, but she'd made no outcry.

Chip Stack phoned the contessa's secretary at the embassy. He had trouble getting her, and her voice was harried when she answered. He wasted no time with his usual banter.

"Tell the contessa," he said, "that I can save her a great of trouble by fishing her jewels up for her before they really vanish."

The secretary's gasp came back at him, then her hurried, almost whispered, "Stay on the line—"

In a matter of moments another extension was picked up. There was a click of a key which apparently made the line private. The contessa's voice came on then, cool and collected.

"I hope your message is not some practical joke, Monsieur Stack.

"It will be no joke if the reporters get wise," Stack said. "Your necklace is in the top of Neptune's castle in the fishtank, contessa. It was whisked off your neck by an invisible thread attached to the bent branch of that tree, something like a snare that country boys set. A trot line on a spring pulled the necklace into the castle and dropped its top, or roof in place." He paused slightly, then went on:

"I thought it was an imitation radar antenna when I first saw it with the top propped up."

"What if I said you're a liar or a blackmailer, Monsieur Stack?" she asked coldly. "You will recollect that this embassy is under a foreign flag and inviolate. Our own security guards can bar any authorities we wish."

"My dear contessa, I just printed up your photos and you look very lovely and devilish. But these photos happen to have been ultraviolet."

"The film that sees in the dark?" she asked.

"Very clearly with ultraviolet light beamed on the object."

"I see," she said. "Is this what you call a shakedown?"

"A rather weird one," he said, grinning. "The insurance people would simply like you to find your jewelry so there is no claim—and for you to hang onto it more carefully in the future."

"That's all you want?" she said with surprise.

"No," Stack admitted. "But I have a chivalrous streak. It's all I'll ask for."

He heard her begin to laugh to herself. "Mr. Stack, I don't imagine you're very handsome, even without that outlandish disguise," she said. "But you have a nice sense of humor. Maybe sometime you'll want to take those other photos with a more modern camera—something like an ultraviolet?"

"I could," he admitted, "even stay over on the expense account for that."

"I think your company would find the results well worth while," she said. "So you might do me one more small favor."

"Return the photos?"

"That's more or less unimportant now," she sighed. "But you might think of how I can explain to my husband how my necklace got into Neptune's castle."

# The Guardians

by JOSEPH PAYNE BRENNAN

*A stolen fortune was within their grasp. But—so were a thousand invisible sentinels.*

ON THREE separate occasions Joel Hunt and Gomez Durban had watched old man Bruderson trudge into Bararubu with a sack of river diamonds. They had

later learned from Metinger, the provisions trader, that the raw diamonds were large and fine, averaging at least thirty dollars a carat.

Naturally their interest was aroused. Their money was nearly gone and neither of them wanted to leave their hammocks, their Indian women and their liquor long enough to perform any arduous and sustained labor.

Gomez suggested that they lie in wait for the old man on his next trip to the village, club him down from behind, take his diamonds and head through the jungle toward the Caramo settlement.

Joel Hunt snorted in disgust. "Simpleton! What is a sack of diamonds? We want the source! We trail that grey fox back to his hole. Then we have buckets of diamonds, not just a little sack! Eh?"

Durban sat up in his hammock and spun his empty bottle toward a nearby ceiba tree. "Bravo! We will be rich, you and I! Hah!"

And so the plan was formulated. Day after day Joel Hunt, the beefy, liquor-bloated ex-plantation boss, and Gomez Durban, his renegade sidekick, sprawled in their hammocks tied between palm trees directly across the narrow dirt road from Metinger's supply store. They drank and they took turns at sleeping, but it seemed as if the old man would never show up.

Finally, one stifling morning, when village pigs lay panting in the red dirt alongside the road, the prospector appeared. Carrying a rifle, and walking as if he were totally unaffected by the temperature, he climbed the plank steps of Metinger's place and went inside.

Durban quickly slid out of his hammock and prodded his snoring partner. Hunt came awake with a grunt, gathered the news and swore softly. "Fool! You are too obvious! Get back on your bed and pretend you sleep. I will keep one eye open. If he sees us stirring in this heat, he may take alarm!"

When Bruderson emerged from the trader's store a half hour later, sleeping pigs were sprawled in scooped-out pockets of earth alongside the road, and directly across the way two unshaven white men dressed in dirty linen snored loudly in their hammocks.

Slinging a formidable bag of supplies across his shoulders, the old man walked a short distance down the road, then veered off on to a side trail which led into the jungle.

Within ten minutes after he disappeared from view, Joel Hunt and Gomez Durban sat up in their hammocks, yawned, stretched and finally gained their feet. They strolled down the street with an aimless air as if they had no certain destination.

Once out of sight on the jungle trail, they hurried. Within twenty minutes they caught sight of their quarry and fell back a little.

"We must not get too close," Hunt warned. "The old fox probably can hear a feather fall!"

Within the green smother of jungle the heat grew intense and the two renegades began to suffer. Sweat rolled out of them at every step; they cursed the stamina of the old prospector, who seemed able to go on indefinitely without stopping.

Finally, when they were both growing dizzy, the old man paused to rest.

Sprawling under a mahogany tree beside the trail, the exhausted pursuers gulped for air.

Joel Hunt spoke between labored breaths.

"Get up and look. He may slip away."

Gomez Durban's ferret face narrowed in protest, but he arose and slouched to the edge of the trail where he could keep a watch on the old man up ahead.

Bruderson, meanwhile, had taken a spot of lunch out of his ample provisions bag. Now he sat on a fallen carnauba tree and refreshed himself: cold black coffee out of a small battered thermos and a piece of smoked meat.

He was a small, wiry man with close-cropped white hair and a sunburned, snuff-brown face. His mild grey eyes glowed with sudden admiration as a procession of morpho butterflies flickered across the trail like immense moving sapphires. He watched until they disappeared in the green wall of jungle.

Bruderson wondered if he could ever bear to leave. In spite of the jungle's treachery, he loved it. His original plan had been to wrest riches out of the land and return to the States as quickly as possible. But now a decade had passed and even though he finally had a strike, he was not at all certain that he would ever go back.

Shouldering his bag, he started along the trail again. It never occurred to him that he would be followed. He kept his eyes on the ground and on the tangle just ahead. By mid-afternoon he could hear the liquid murmur of water over rocks. Shortly he came in sight of his hut standing in a clearing alongside the trail. It was a small thatch-sided affair, with a single window and it had an improvised tin roof. He was very proud of it.

Setting down his bag and rifle in the hut, Bruderson took a bucket and started out for the river. Just as he reached the trail, two men dressed in sweat-soaked dirty linen suits staggered into view and hailed him. He looked around, startled and puzzled, but not really alarmed, and they hurried toward him. Too late, he saw one of them draw a .45 revolver from his belt.

He considered making a break for his rifle in the hut, but decided the risk was too great. Instead, he stood motionless and waited.

Joel Hunt waved the revolver. "Drop that bucket and raise your hands!"

The old man complied and Hunt drew a sopping sleeve across his livid face.

"Take a look in the hut," he told Durban.

The smaller man ducked into the open doorway. Presently he reappeared, carrying the prospector's rifle.

Hunt eyed the old man carefully. He held his revolver level with his victim's stomach. "If you want to live, show us where you're dredgin' up those diamonds!"

Bruderson, stalling for time to think, made the wrong answer. "What diamonds?"

With something like a sigh, Hunt shoved his revolver under his belt. Heat and exertion had punished his corpulent bulk and now he was in an irritable mood. Stepping suddenly forward with a surprising agility, he slammed his huge fist savagely into the old man's face. Blood spurted and Bruderson literally bounced against the ground.

"That's just a sample!" Hunt warned. "Get up!"

Bruderson stood up painfully. Blood streamed down his face onto his clothes. He gazed at the two renegades groggily, through a red mist.

Hunt scowled at him. "You talking, or you want more?"

The old man tried to speak and was temporarily unable to. Gomez thought he was still refusing.

The renegade's greasy face became taut with expectancy. "I'll work on him a little! You had a turn!" He moved forward.

Hunt swore. "Wait, you crazy fool! You work on him and he won't be able to talk!"

Durban drew back sullenly.

"I'll show you," Bruderson whispered through smashed lips.

They took the old man's bucket, gravel-washing pans and a shovel, which they found in the hut, and followed the prospector down the trail toward the river.

Once Bruderson stumbled and fell heavily against Hunt, smearing the big man's filthy linen suit with blood. Hunt shoved him aside, cursing luridly. "Pick up your feet, old fool!"

A scant half mile away the trees thinned out. Suddenly they found themselves on the bank of an immensely wide but shallow-looking river. The current splashed around rocks and jungle debris near the banks but further out the water appeared calm and smooth.

The old prospector pointed toward a placid area near the middle of the river. "Out there. A bed of soft gravel. That's where I got the big ones."

Joel Hunt seized him by the shirt front and shook him. "You better not be lyin'!"

"That's the place," Bruderson insisted.

Hunt frowned. "I don't trust this old fox. Tear off his shirt and tie him while we're out there."

Gomez Durban obeyed with alacrity. Ripping off the old man's shirt, he tripped the prospector over backwards and tied his hands and feet with strips torn from his own garment.

Bruderson winced as the bonds cut into his flesh, but he made no complaint.

Durban laughed, proud of his handiwork. "He won't hop around none now!"

Hunt shouldered the shovel and waded into the river. Durban followed a pace behind with the rifle and bucket.

For a few yards they slipped and skidded on the wet rocks, but once past these the footing became relatively firm. The water rose from their hips to their waists, then halfway to their armpits as they neared the middle of the river.

"Deeper than it looked," Durban grumbled.

Hunt shrugged. "No matter, long as it's calm."

Reaching the middle, they stopped and Hunt worked the shovel into the gravelly bottom while Durban held up the bucket.

On the bank Bruderson watched intently, making no effort to escape from his bonds.

Joel Hunt had dumped two shovelsful of gravel into the bucket and was dredging for a third when it happened.

The big man suddenly yelled and dropped the shovel.

An instant later Durban screamed and let go of the bucket. "Piranha!" he shrieked, panic already in his voice.

Both men whirled and started toward the bank. All around them the water began to boil and seethe as if it had a separate life of its own.

Joel Hunt's bellow of pain minggled with Gomez Durban's high-pitched scream.

A third of the distance toward shore the water began turning red and Durban's screams were abruptly silenced as he faltered and sank under the surface.

Joel Hunt's bull strength carried him to the rocks along the bank. Had it not been for the rocks he might have survived, but he stumbled and fell flat in the water three times before he cleared the last of them. By then it was too late.

Looking as if he had been flayed from the shoulders down, he lurched up the bank with half a dozen of the killer fish still clinging to him. Screaming with agony, Hunt ran wildly in circles. Suddenly he pitched to the ground and grew silent.

In the river the water at one spot had turned to a bloody froth.

It was nearly an hour later before Bruderson got free of his bonds and reeled back to his hut on numbed feet.

As he inspected his swollen face in a cracked piece of mirror, he realized that the savage blow which had smashed his lip and bloodied his nose had also saved his life. For without doubt the two renegades would have killed him once they verified the source of the diamonds.

He had known that the river was swarming with piranhas. Always before, when he wished to dredge gravel, he had killed some small animal, covered it with its own blood and cast it into the water farther down the river. Piranhas, detecting the blood, would rush toward it from all nearby parts of the stream. It was only then that he had ventured to wade out and hurriedly fill a bucket with the precious diamond-laced gravel.

Making it appear accidental, the old prospector had deliberately stumbled against Hunt on the way to the river in order to smear his tormentor's clothes with blood.

This time, it was Bruderson's blood, blotted against the renegade's linen suit, which had called the killer fish.

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**Complete—Next Month**

**THE PATTERN WENT WRONG**

*The New Mike Shayne Novelet*

By BRETT HALLIDAY

**All through the Miami night police, and underworld alike waited and wondered—and feared. For this killer was like no other ever seen—silent, faceless and deadly beyond description. And then the word went out—somewhere, somehow, Mike Shayne must complete his toughest, deadliest assignment: "Find and destroy the Black Phantom before another girl dies!**

Featuring

# JOE RODRIGUEZ

# THE MILLION DOLLAR ROAD

*Solve—if you dare—the deadly riddle of the five power-lusting captains of industry who had so much to live for that they killed—and were killed—to get it.*

## by TOM H. MORIARTY

JOE RODRIGUEZ strolled into the lobby of the Hollywood Coolidge that evening on what he regarded as a soft-touch assignment: routine gumshoe work, entertainment of a sort, spectacular food with no tab, and a change of scenery.

The mayor of Los Angeles was due to appear at the hotel to accept an award of merit from the Compo-Guidance Corporation. Lieutenant Ford Bennett, night watch commander of Hollywood Division, Los Angeles Police Department, had assigned the rookie detective to monitor the mayor's visit because the papers had carried a big story about the forthcoming tenth anniversary banquet of the giant aerospace manufacturer. When weirdos knew the day, the time, and the place in advance, anything could happen to a prominent public official.

This evening Jose Juan Rodriguez wore the executive uniform of the new breed of young missile

engineers and physicists: Oxford gray suit, with pants which looked as though they were painted on; black Navy plain-toe shoes; and diagonally stripped tie of subdued red and blue.

The lean strength and shoulder rack of the young detective suggested that he might have pullel an oar with the varsity eight on the Charles River while attending M.I.T. The flat set of Joe's sooty Spanish eyes could well fit the picture of a young man absorbed incessantly in the maze of analytical geometry.

All in all, it was a brand new act for Joe Rodriguez on the Hollywood Boulevard beat and he was enjoying the role. He reminded himself to thank Matt Bachwald, the Compo-Guidance public relations man, who had filled him in on the general looks and behavior of an ambitious young man in the aerospace industry.

The mayor came through the lobby at 7:20, escorted by Blake O'Malley, the handsome fifty-ish president and chairman of the board at Compo-Guidance. A dapper young official, later identified as Hans Arendorf, executive vice-president, brought up the rear, as a kind of ceremonial aide.

Rodriguez sauntered on in their wake and slid into a seat at a table in the Embassy Room, lost in the crowd of several hundred guests.

One thing that immediately struck the plainclothesman was the presence of a few unattached women among the invited group. They might have been mistaken for movie queens, in the high gloss of make-up and the glitter of high-style gowns. These were women physicists, engineers, and executives—phenomena of the space age.

All went well from the start for Rodriguez: San Francisco crab cocktail; inch-thick Kansas City steak; Oysters Rockefeller, steaming with heat; a statuesque filly with hair the color of fire at dawn singing "Stardust" as though Hoagy Carmichael might be in the audience. Rodriguez smiled his satisfaction with the evening's bounty.

Blake O'Malley stood up to make his Award remarks.

From then on, all went bad.

Blake O'Malley was evidently a compulsive toaster on public occasions—and as it worked out, somebody had to know this fact.

In twenty seconds, O'Malley completed his eulogy of the mayor, took a placque of engraved honors in his left hand and lifted a champagne glass in his right hand. The assembly arose *en masse* to drink the toast.

As he said the words, "Ladies and gentlemen, a toast of honor to our distinguished friend," and drank down the golden liquid, Blake O'Malley jack-knifed into a *V*. The placque clattered to the table and the glass crashed to the

floor. Blake O'Malley fell forward across the table, his lobster-red face a Halloween mask of horror and pain.

Rodriguez sprang up and away, headed for the speaker's table. His path was through people too stunned to react, except in wide-eyed disbelief. On the dais, Rodriguez yelled, "He needs a doctor. Will one please come up!"

There were dozens of doctors in the excited crowd, but they were doctors of mathematics, physics, and chemistry. No one responded.

Rodriguez dashed out of the banquet room, took the kitchen service phone, instructed the switchboard girl to get the hotel physician to the Embassy Room on the double, and ran back.

The mayor was now bending over the supine O'Malley, doing his best to chafe circulation back into wrists. Sutprisingly, the beautiful red-head songstress was back from the wings, sponging O'Malley's brow with a napkin.

Three waiters, whose special job had been the serving of the speaker's table, stood by, paralyzed. Rodriguez flashed the police badge on his wallet and ordered them not to leave. The house detective and Matt Bachwald now arrived to assist.

"It could be anything, heart attack or a poisoned drink," Rodriguez said to them. "Hold the kitchen staff."

The house physician rushed in, scowled as he made a brief examination, muttered "Dead" and turned the body over to incoming ambulance attendants.

While this was going on, the whispers of the crowd grew in volume as people expressed wonderment, sorrow and their own versions of the shocking tableau. The mayor stepped to the microphone and held his hand up. The audience stilled.

"Mr. O'Malley has been pronounced dead," the mayor said. "The police will investigate, of course." He faced around to Rodriguez and continued, "This man is a plainclothes police officer. Have you any instructions for us?"

Rodriguez said, "Those of you who are officials of Compo-Guidance and associates of Mr. O'Malley are requested to report at once to the Hollywood Division station house at De Longpre and Wilcox, a few blocks from this hotel."

The exodus to the doors of the Embassy Room no sooner started than a commotion in the halls signaled the arrival of news reporters and cameramen from the LAPD divisional press room. Knowing Rodriguez, they headed for him. Joe stuck to his first estimate: "Could be anything. Check the coroner's office."

"Who's the next-up executive?" a reporter demanded.

"Hans Arendorf," a man beside him said. With that, the unknown kibitzer took the newsman in tow.

Rodriguez studied the self-appointed helper as he walked away and registered a few identifying features: greying crew cut hair, a lanky six-footer with thick horn-rimmed glasses and an eagle-sharp nose tip.

By this time a squad car drew up at the rear service bay. Rodriguez hailed the shotgun rider and turned over to him the carefully cradled death bottle of champagne and the glasses, for return to De Longpre.

The bottle was a split of a French vintner, Beaumarchais, and different in label from the magnum bottles which had been served to the other guests.

One by one, Rodriguez and the hotel detective now checked out the roster of twenty-two cooks, waiters, and busboys in the kitchen. The young detective saw no mugg shots in the flesh, nor did the hotel detective note anything wrong with their union card credentials.

The three waiters on the speaker's table detail and Louie, the captain of waiters, were held to one side until the end.

*"Enrique Munguia, mozo de café,"* said Rodriguez to the first man on the list. *"Como esta. Habla Español, no?"*

"I also speak the English," said Munguia haughtily. "I am cit'zen *naturalizado."*

"Okay," said Rodriguez, "so's my old man. Nobody's bugging you, *amigo.* Tell me this, did you uncork the bottle of champagne to serve Mr. O'Malley?"

"I not," said the Mexican waiter. He pointed to a hard-eyed man whom Rodriguez had pegged for a mid-western farmhand down on his luck in the big city.

"You uncorked it?" said Rodriguez to the gnarled one, who was listed on the roster as Ed Brown.

"I'm clean," Brown said calmly, "except for a vag rap in Reno and a drunk charge in Frisco."

"You're clean, so what?" said Rodriguez. "You popped the cork and then—"

"No," said Brown. "I served it, yeah. But a fellow named Salmon or Samold, something like that, he opened the little bottle, poured the glass and passed it to me to serve."

"There's no Salmon on this list," said Rodriguez. "What happened to him? Only you three were there when I reached the platform."

"I see heem," the third waiter, Felix Engada, spoke up. "He go kitchen."

"What did he look like?"

"He bigga strong. *Muy fuerte. Cabellos grande."*

Captain Louie now came into the interview circle. Joe Rodriguez said to him, "Do you remember a waiter named Salmon or Samold?"

"No. What's he look like?"

"Big and very strong. Great head of hair, say like a violin player."

"Violin player? We get no vio-

lin players. They 'fraid they hurt the hands."

Rodriguez ended the questioning. He had names, addresses, and could bring them in any time if desired. More important, he had a fair description of a possible impostor and poisoner.

II

AT THE station house, Bennett filled him in. "The lab found hydrocyanic acid in the champagne glass particles, but not in the champagne bottle. He could have been rubbed out by a total stranger, some stray psychopath trying out a new stunt for kicks, or there may be some deranged person in Mr. O'Malley's life who deliberately chose the time and place."

"I take it the Compo-Guidance people didn't come up with much," said Rodriguez.

"True statement," said the veteran, "unless you believe, as some of them seem to, that an agent of a foreign power marked out Blake O'Malley to get rid of his leadership in the aerospace industry. Big as this outfit is, I can't buy that foreign agent stuff. Why? Because if they were going to eliminate any one man, I think it would be some kind of a double-dome inventor or wizard physicist, not a glad hand boy like O'Malley."

A desk sergeant now came in with a typed list, which Bennett tossed over to his rookie, saying, "Joe, call off the names and I'll brief you on what they said."

"Hans Arendorf, age thirty-three, Executive Vice-President," Rodriguez read. "A sharp young guy."

"Said firm was being sued by two competitors over patents. Unlikely enemies."

"Will del Valle, thirty-one, Vice-President in Charge of Planning."

"Said nothing."

"George Sinamone, thirty-two, V-P for Production."

"Said nothing," Bennett intoned.

"Lester Fenner, V-P for Personnel."

"Said O'Malley had divorced first wife, now living in France."

"Butler Graham III, V-P for Public Relations."

"Said O'Malley was target of a foreign agent."

"Joan Gilson, V-P for Office Administration. Imagine, a woman officer."

"Wait'll you see that little broad, Joe," said Bennett. "A real accident-causer. Anyway, she elaborated on what Lester Fenner said. O'Malley's first wife wanted her alimony increased from one thousand dollars a month to thirty-five hundred dollars. O'Malley refused to be sandbagged."

"Clayton McRoberts, thirty-eight, Director of Security. Say, is that old Mac who solved the mink storage heists?"

"Mac himself, now in the chips. He mentioned that O'Malley went to and from his home in Bel-Air by company helicopter. Said it was to avoid traffic jams, but McRoberts wondered out loud if the man was avoiding something else, such as an enemy."

"Fred Paisley, thirty-seven, V-P for Government Relations."

"Said O'Malley was a bomber pilot in World War Two. Had in mind the possibility of an old service beef with some rivet jockey now working in a C-G plant."

"Pierre Giraud, forty-two, V-P for Foreign Relations."

"He was a faint echo of Butler Graham."

"Matt Bachwald, twenty-nine, P-R man."

"Said nothing. Wasn't asked. He made up the list for me," Bennett said.

"Thank you, sir," said Rodriguez. He went to the squad room to digest the material.

Matt Bachwald awaited the young detective there. Rodriguez's eyes lit up, thinking that this burnished young crew-cut looked like police material himself, with his confident face and sturdy build.

The PR man said, "I didn't care to upstage my boss at Lieutenant Bennett's meeting, but there's something that shouldn't go unsaid. Confidentially, here it is. Nobody thought to mention possible enemies of O'Malley in our own organization. I mean the people who got cut off in the last reduction-in-force."

By that he meant a big lay-off of employes, Rodriguez considered. The detective's mind reflexed to a business section headline of some months past: 2300 OUT AT COMPO-GUIDANCE. But the atmosphere of the banquet at the Hollywood Coolidge had been of success, achievement, and leadership. It did not add up.

Bachwald explained: "The people interviewed tonight were all from the Administrative Division of C-G, sort of a small holding division for the operating divisions. The insiders. But the operating divisions have executives, too. And in the Russian roulette of reducing the operating force on one or another cancelled contract, four of those top men got the gate."

Rodriguez noted down in his book the names of three engineers: Maurice Iliff, John R. St. Claire, Edward Caldemann, and the former V-P in Charge of Branch Plants, Bert Kelly. After

each name he noted the salaries mentioned by Bachwald: a range from $25,000 a year to $33,000, in the case of Kelly. To be suddenly separated from that kind of money could warp a man's thinking, Rodriguez judged.

"Not a one of those men, to my knowledge," said Bachwald, "has been able to hook on with anybody else again, so far. The market for specialists is temporarily off right now, particularly if you've got the out-going chute on your record."

Here was an honest shedding of light, Rodriguez judged. Possibly the first completely frank report he had received. He decided then and there to look into the lives of the people at the top.

In the morning, Joe Rodriguez first contacted Joan Gilson, since he had been intrigued by the commander's briefing on her. She was indeed an accident-causer, Rodriguez saw. The young woman with the alive chestnut hair crown was classically chiselled: the photogenic pushout of cheekbones; a Liberty dollar straight nose; in all, a fair, fair lady.

Rodriguez now learned that she possessed real executive power, could call her own shots.

"The board of directors is meeting right now and Mr. Fenner is tied up," Joan Gilson said, "but I'll okay this in his place so you won't have to wait."

Rodriguez thanked her and mentioned the name of Bert Kelly, while watching her face for any show of surprise. Her green eyes flickered only the least bit.

"He's no longer with us," she said.

"I know. That's why I wanted to get a line on him."

The lady smiled, saying, "You police people do get around. In that case, you may want some of the other files—"

"Right. The names are St. Claire, Iliff, and Caldemann."

A puzzled look came to her face. She said, "You mean—that's what you people are thinking? Revenge for getting the hatchet?"

"No, not necessarily," said Rodriguez. He decided to build a few Brownie points for himself by taking her into his confidence. He continued, "More along the lines of a man cracking up and acting abnormally. Unreasonably. Some times a man's background indicates whether he is a crack-up candidate or not. That's all I'm after here."

The tactic succeeded. She led him to a file room nearby. As she pulled out the personnel dossiers, Rodriguez now knew where the material was located. When she left the room and he was alone, he quickly drew out the dossiers of the officials who had attended the station house seminar. From the papers he noted home addresses and a few miscellaneous facts, such as club affiliations and hobbies.

Then he returned all the files

and went back to Joan Gilson's office.

"The board has just elected Mr. Arendorf our new top man," she said. "A brilliant young executive. The company is in good hands."

Joe Rodriguez grinned, thinking of the unseemly haste in their action, the absence of simple respect for the departed. The aerospace industry was certainly not run on sentiment. He said in feigned seriousness, "I'm sure Mr. O'Malley would approve of him, too."

"Get out of here, detective," she said with a laugh. "You caught me with my loyalties down."

## III

THE SWING shift streamed into the Vultania division of C-G, a quarter mile away when Rodriguez started back for De Longpre. The scene looked like a Saturday crush at Santa Anita, Rodriguez thought.

Was there a psycho at the wheel of one of those cars, a fellow who blindly resented the palace guard up the street?

At the station house, the desk sergeant waved Rodriguez into Lieutenant Bennett's office.

"A man named Maurice Iliff has been found beaten up at Malibu," said Bennett. "He's in critical condition at Bay Emergency. He was wearing a ring, like a college class ring, with the name Compo-Guidance engraved on it. Could be some kind of a longevity award."

Rodriguez quickly related what he knew of Iliff. One of the details was that Iliff's home address was in Beverly Hills, about twenty miles from the scene of the crime.

"This came through less than an hour ago," said Bennett. "You better check his home. If he has any family, they may not know yet that he is injured. I'll clear jurisdiction with Bev Hills."

Twice before in his short career Rodriguez had faced the sad task of notifying wives that husbands were in the hospital. He did not relish the prospect now, but at the same time he knew that at such moments of tension, information was freely volunteered.

He found a cool young woman at the Iliff apartment in the fringe 'slums' of Beverly Hills. She regarded him sternly, as if she had suddenly regretted opening the door to a house-to-house solicitor.

On the Iliff personnel records, there had been noted a Mrs. Iliff, age twenty-six. No children. Joe Rodriguez took the chance that this was she, saying, "I'm Rodriguez, Los Angeles police, Mrs. Iliff."

Then he waited until the woman said, "Yes?"

"You may know already why I'm here, mam."

"I'm afraid I don't."

"Then please compose yourself, Mrs. Iliff. Your husband—"

"Drunk again?" she interrupted. "Where is he this time? I'll go down and bail him out."

"I'm afraid not this time, mam. This time he's in the hospital. Bay Emergency. I suggest you allow me to drive you over. I'd like to ask a few questions."

She hurried to get a coat and join him in the car. He saw that she was almost unnaturally composed. No tears. No hysterics. As though she were hardened to misadventure and disaster.

"He was in some kind of fight on the beach," Rodriguez said enroute. "We want you to tell us if he had any known enemies, any recent disagreements, so we can investigate."

She said, "He was at the top in his profession not so long ago, with the Compo-Guidance people, Vultania Division. He just couldn't take it, Mr. Rodriguez, when they made him the goat. You ask for the names of enemies. He had none, to my knowledge. Up to the moment he lost out, everyone was his friend."

"Even Blake O'Malley? The man who fired him?"

"Later he hated O'Malley. Before, no."

"Other than O'Malley, did he ever later single out any person at C-G who might have plotted to get him out?"

"He never particularly admired that public relations vice-president, Butler Graham, or the Gilson woman who was O'Malley's secretary."

"Can you remember anything he ever said about them?" Rodriguez asked.

"Maurice felt that Graham, who was not an engineer, was a kind of stock market slicker and not concerned with the efficiency of the rockets, guidance systems, air frames and what-not that they build. He got a big laugh out of Graham hiring a corporate psychiatrist at some outlandish figure of several hundred dollars a day. As for Mrs. Gilson—"

"You mean Joan Gilson? Is she Mrs. Gilson?"

"So she is. She just doesn't use the missus tag any more."

The Rodriguez questioning was cut short in the Receiving driveway of the hospital. The young detective wished her luck and drove on, thinking with a shake of the head that when the police medics say 'critical' they never kid anybody.

To continue his sort-out of the numerous C-G officials, Rodriguez decided now to use the Iliff incident as a wedge. In asking information on Iliff's background, he could get a closer estimate on the circle of candidates for the suspect list. He nominated Butler Braham III for his initial contact, on the premise that the man could be more readily analyzed than could mathematicians, physicists, and process engineers whose minds were far out.

However, before returning to the Compo-Guidance Admin Division, Rodriguez figured there was time to perform the preliminary casing of home addresses, which for him had so often placed suspects in better focus. Arendorf, Giraud, Paisley, and Sinamone lived in Pacific Palisades, Rodriguez found, in spacious, picture-gardened dwellings on the golden shelf.

Del Valle and Fenner were content with ten-room mansions in upper Benedict Canyon. Graham and Joan Gilson had apartments in the Lanai Serrano Tower, a new landmark on Wilshire Boulevard, in the plush enclave where 75-foot palm trees receive seasonal permanents.

A cold-blooded killer in such exotic settings? Rodriguez whistled. This case could be a dilly!

As the young plainclothesman drove into the C-G parking lot, he noted a helicopter, civilian type and medium in size, rise vertically from the reaches of the lot and put-put-put its way northward. This helicopter, he soon learned at the reception desk, had whisked away the man whom he had come to see, Butler Graham III, and two other persons, Fred Paisley and Joan Gilson. Irritated, Rodriguez judged that he had lost hours by being perhaps fifteen minutes late.

The presence of Joan Gilson in company with Butler Graham intrigued Rolriguez. It could be a harmless business errand to another plant, for C-G had one in the San Fernando Valley and one in Lakewood, in addition to the Vultania set-up. On the other hand, it could be a semi-social trip. If this were true, Rodriguez was intensely interested in casing the form it took. In any case he could not fault Graham and Paisley for wanting to be in the company of this chestnut-haired stunner.

Rodriguez acted fast. He went to a phone box in the lot and contacted the switchboard at Communications, downtown. On a two-way direct, he was soon talking to the pilot of a police traffic-monitoring helicopter which hovered over home-streaming freeway cars at the Interchange.

"I know who you mean," the helicopter officer said through the crackle of static. "Their chopper radio-phone is on our band. Hang on."

## IV

IN A BIT more than two minutes. Rodriguez learned that the C-G helicopter had deposited three people in the parking lot in back of the Lobster A Go Go Restaurant on La Cienega Boulevard.

He headed his car for Restaurant Row. Life was a bowl of litchi nuts again. The little victory of tailing a chopper produced in Rodriguez a fine feeling. He felt extra good, too, because he knew Eldie San Onofre, the owner-manager of

this ritz fish house and could therefore wander around the concourse of dining tables, large menu in his hand, like any other straw boss waiter captain on the premises.

"Just a routine look-see," Rodriguez explained to the owner. "Protective measures for that slick chick. No arrests. No questions."

Eddie San Onofre scowled, looking at the rose between thorns at the secluded table. Eddie was on Joan Gilson's side by simple virtue of his romantic ancestry.

"The old bom?" he said. He meant Butler Graham, who, although older, was the sleekest of the three 'boms'.

"No," Rodriguez said. "The fullback in the plaid sport coat. Who's he?"

"The beeg bom?" said San Onofre. "Don' know."

Whoever he was, Joe Rodriguez marked him down for routine checking, since he had joined the party of C-G people here, and also because his talk was apparently fascinating to Joan Gilson.

Rodriguez glided by the C-G table, screened from view in the wake of Eddie San Onofre. Eddie was very good with the hip bows and the *sirs* when he wanted to be. Eddie paused long enough at the table to enable Rodriguez to note again the dark surfer's tan of the husky stranger. He noted, too, that in his conversation the handsome big fellow was not telling the

world; he was being careful to tell only three persons, who strained to hear his low-key voice and thus from a distance had seemed fascinated.

Later, with the cooperation of San Onofre's chief parking kook, Joe Rodriguez identified the stranger's car, a top-down Phinxa roadster.

What he read on the white registration slip on the steering wheel was inconclusive: *Santa Monica Canyon Club, Los Angeles.* A management official of the club, perhaps.

Rodriguez drove back to De Longpre, deflated at the meager results. He did not have time to feel down in the mouth for long. Fred Bennett had something to say which changed the immediate program of investigation.

"The man Iliff is dead," said Bennett. "Our nurse down there got a few words out of him before he died. 'Warn Hans,' he said. 'Warn Hans.' He surely meant Hans Arendorf, the new president."

"I better get on my horse," said Rodriguez.

"Right," said the veteran. "No one knows about this 'Warn Hans'

business except our own people. See Arendorf yourself. Tell him."

" 'Warn Hans,' " Joe Rodriguez said thoughtfully. "Warn him somebody's planning another poison cocktail? Could be. Warn him somebody's planning a high-level stab in the back? That sounds more like it, from what I've seen of the gold mines today."

Young Hans Arendorf, seemingly unimpressed by his new importance, was located inside a giant rocket fuel chamber, clothed in coveralls, checking out the quality of workmanship in welded seams, when Rodriguez tracked him down. The president and chairman of the Board was calling off technical terms to an engineer.

The young detective marvelled at what he saw. This young fellow had to be a kind of streamlined wizard to reach such a lofty level in the pyramid at thirty-three. Rodriguez considered his own age, twenty-seven, and wondered where he had been when they passed out the brains. Maybe he should have gone to UCLA after all instead of to the Police Academy.

"Glad to see you, Rodriguez," said Arendorf. "I've got something to show you."

Arendorf climbed out of the chamber and took a manila-colored envelope from his back pocket.

Out of the envelope he took a plain postcard.

"This arrived at my home," he said. "Some crackpot trying to scare me."

Rodriguez read the typed message: *Sell your 23,763 shares and get out quick or you will follow O'Malley.*

There was no signature or identification of the sender.

"Do you own that exact amount of stock?" said Rodriguez. His first thought was that only an insider could know the exact amount.

"I do," said Arendorf. "However, it's a matter of public record, published by law in our annual statement to stockholders. We have about sixty thousand stockholders, so most anybody could know."

"We'll paint for prints, but usually poison pen writers leave no trail. Now, is there anybody you might even vaguely associate with this?"

"There have been a few gadflies at our stockholder meetings, but they've been professionals. Certainly not potentially violent people."

The answer exasperated Rodriguez, because the 'Warn Hans' matter was at the top of his mind. He said at once, "The other night you people never said a word about the top-rankers you fired. Yet they were people we certainly should have known about. Maurice Iliff, for example, just died. He might have been able to tell us something."

"I guess you are right," said Arendorf.

Rodriguez saw that he had his man in a cooperative mood, so he followed up with the confidential information on Iliff's dying warning. Young Arendorf's reaction was a grim mask and silence.

"It's pretty plain," continued Rodriguez," that this administration division group is hand-picked and highly-paid and therefore greatly envied. A person who is invited into the group is extremely fortunate, has a chance to become a millionaire in time. Is that correct?"

"Entirely correct," said Arendorf. "These are the people who took the risks in the formative years, bet their futures on C-G, and made a big thing of it. They deserve their big rewards. The vice-presidents are paid seventy-five thousand dollars a year. The exec v-p, a hundred thousand. The president and board chairman is king. Half a million for him."

"Was Maurice Iliff once in line to climb higher, to make this group?"

"He was. So were the other two engineers O'Malley dropped."

"So now you have the power to do the same thing. I'd suggest, Mr. Arendorf, that your first move be to hire a bodyguard. The count down on you may have already started."

"I'll do it," Hans Arendorf agreed quickly. "And please tell me if I can be of any help in your work."

"You can," said Rodriguez. "Those men who lost out, they undoubtedly kept in touch with each other in sort of a consolation club, comparing notes. The police could bring them together and they'd talk to a certain extent. But if you brought them together, things would go much better as far as extracting usable information, if any. They couldn't help feeling that your gesture somehow marked a turn in their affairs. The humiliation of being fired would be removed. They'd feel free to talk."

"I have no objection," said Arendorf. "As a matter of fact, O'Malley fired them for reasons of his own. I thought every one of them had brains, talent for the job, and personal drive."

"O'Malley did some strange things, then?"

"I often tried to pin down his reasons, but never could. He was the old-fashioned one-man band type of executive, actually out of place in aerospace. Oddly enough, I was never close to him personally."

"Who was?"

"His cronies on the yacht were Graham, Paisley, and Giraud, and for a while, Bert Kelly. And of course, Joan Gilson."

"What do you mean 'of course'?"

"I see you haven't heard of that yet, Mr. Rodriguez. Well, it figures. Most people in the aerospace industry preferred to forget it. Nobody wanted to offend their top

boss and risk the consequences."

Hans Arendorf then briefly sketched the sudden infatuation of wifeless Blake O'Malley with his cover-girl secretary, Mrs. Gilson; the separation of Mrs. Gilson from her husband Red Gilson, a former pro football player; the appointment of Joan Gilson as a vice-president; and of the woman's establishment in the insiders' group, socially and money-wise.

"She was never divorced, then?" said the detective.

"Red Gilson wouldn't accomodate her. He had his pride, I guess. She could do nothing about it, either, or Blake O'Malley would have been named co-respondent, with the bad publicity that brings. Red seemed to get more satisfaction out of spiting her than he would have gotten out of a money judgment in his favor."

"All of which was probably agreeable to O'Malley," said Rodriguez. "He didn't sound like the marrying kind."

Hans Arendorf's conclusion to the interview was the kind of action Rodriguez expected in a big league exec and liked to see. The new C-G chief called Lester Fenner, his personnel man, and instructed him to get in touch at once with Bert Kelly, John R. St. Claire, and Edward Caldemann and ask them as a personal favor to him to meet at C-G's executive beach home at Malibu in the morning at ten-thirty.

Jose Juan Rodriguez felt at last that the show was on the road. He reported his whereabouts to Lieutenant Bennett's orderly room and then drove home to the environs of Chavez Ravine and his 1890-vintage four-room apartment, glad for the chance to get some sleep.

Tomorrow figured to be a real big day.

## V

IN THE MORNING, however, the glow had vanished. In its place settled the realistic smog of duty, in the form of a bugging memo left by the night watch commander. Blake O'Malley had been planted with a quick shovel, Bennett advised, and C-G officials were present.

"How could you manage to miss that one?" Bennett wanted to know. Central file cards had shown a Joseph "Red" Gilson arrested on suspicion of drunk driving and released to custody of his wife Joan Gilson four years ago in Westwood.

"Is this the Joan Gilson at C-G or are there several Joan Gilsons?" Bennett went on sarcastically. "The waiter Ed Brown turned out to have drawing ability and is making a sketch of what Salmon or Samold looks like. Check this out."

On top of these backside jabs of the official harpoon, Rodriguez forlornly remembered that he had intended to check out the Santa

Monica Canyon Club's Phinxa roadster before going to Malibu and the Arendorf meeting. Now there was no time. Back to normal scurry and worry, he drove a steady 65 m.p.h. on the Ventura Freeway, cloverleafed south at Sepulveda and dashed off a San Diego Freeway outlet to pick up Sunset Boulevard and head north for Malibu.

Two young bush-haircut men in their early thirties—St. Claire and Caldemann—and an older carrot-topped Irishman, Bert Kelly, waited on the sun deck of the C-G beach house when Rod rolled in.

"Hans is late," Kelly told Rodriguez. "Maybe you can tell us why this amazing change of the corporate heart."

Rodriguez said, "The murder of O'Malley is shaping up as an inside job. You gentlemen may know something to help us. Why? Because Maurice Iliff's last words were a warning to Mr. Arendorf. If Iliff knew something, the police figure you people might know the same things."

"So Arendorf is acting like sort of a friend of the court?" said Kelly.

"The man's been warned by a letter also," Joe Rodriguez explained. "Told to sell his stock and get out. You people may be the means of saving Arendorf's life."

"Fine," said Kelly.

The others nodded assent.

This was not to be. A dozen to fifteen minutes went by and Hans Arendorf still did not show up. Then a shout, urgent, like a seal's bark, came from a swimmer beyond the breaking surf. The shout repeated as the swimmer advanced to the shore. In some minutes, the swimmer stood, head and shoulders above water. His right arm clutched a floating head.

The swimmer yelled, "Man drowned."

The man was Hans Arendorf. His mistake had been to arrive too early and decide to go for a swim.

As the swimmer and a flock of beachhouse people took turns working over Arendorf with futile chest pushes and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, Rodriguez studied the dead man carefully. His throat was brazed purplish in spots. This could have been by hand choking, or by rope garroting. A red gash on the back of his left ear could have been the lethal scrape of a man's ring.

Rodriguez grimaced, thinking how this secret warfare between greedy people had claimed as a casualty a young brain whom the nation needed. With the three who had waited, the plainclothesman returned to the sun deck, leaving the body in the custody of a sheriff's deputy.

"Think hard," he said forcefully to the men. "What could Maurice Iliff have had in mind when he said, 'Warn Hans.'? Warn him about what? Against whom?"

John St. Clair spoke up first, saying, "Will del Valle owned the most stock, if that means anything. Forty-five thousand shares. But even so, he could not swing the board to make him president over Arendorf."

Caldemann said that he once had heard Pierre Giraud downgrade Arendorf at a club bar, calling him a "Boy Scout" and not old enough to have any judgment.

Bert Kelly made his bet on a combo of Joan Gilson with either Butler Graham III or Fred Paisley.

"When O'Malley died," Kelly said, "Joan Gilson automatically fell off the gravy train and she knew it. She could never play footsie with Hans because he was all engineer, all physicist. He was happily married, with no signs of turning in to a lover boy."

"Would you say that Mrs. Gilson is going to be named in the O'Malley will?" Rodriguez asked Kelly.

"I should know a little something about that one," said Kelly with a scalding laugh. "I'll always think O'Malley fired me because I was once buddy-buddy with him, and in a loose moment of confidence on his yacht he bragged that he had figured out how to outwit Red Gilson. He didn't tell me the details, but he was cutely pleased with himself, if you get what I mean. Red Gilson, who wouldn't allow a divorce, was not going to get a cent of his money, yes sir, and at the same time he said Joan would have no worries if anything happened to him. So to answer your question, I'd bet that somehow or other the woman does all right for herself as per usual, when the will is read."

"So you think that she's had it?"

"Definitely. Everybody knows she was a company pet, given big dough and a phoney title because she happened to be O'Malley's little hotsy totsy girl."

"In other words, they won't keep up the high cost of maintaining a dead man's office wife."

Kelly nodded. He didn't seem too unhappy.

On his way back from Malibu, after calling back the details of the Arendorf tragedy to Hollywood Division, Rodriguez turned left at West Channel Road on the northern fringe of Santa Monica, and wound up through nearby Santa Monica Canyon to the country club of the same name.

His purpose was to check out the Phinxa and the man who had driven it to Lobster A Go Go. Since this coastal palisade offshoot was part of the City of Los Angeles, Rodriguez had police authority. He went direct to the club office, presented his credentials, and asked for the manager.

"Mr. Gilson is in the pool," he was told. "You can see him there if you wish."

Rodriguez looked out the window. A dark-tanned giant of a man

ploughed a ferryboat's furrow in the pool. He was the unknown third man at the Lobster A Go Go. Here he was the manager of the club, as well as the well-hidden separated husband of Joan Gilson.

Rodriguez decided that poolside was as good a place as any to try to probe.

"Hans Arendorf is dead," Rodriguez said to Gilson for openers. "This is a police investigation. We would appreciate your cooperation."

Gilson remained silent, looking the detective straight in the eyes, without apparent reaction.

"I thought you might like to talk it over here," Rodriguez continued when the man did not reply. "Instead of down at the station house." This kind of remark usually unthawed silent people.

"So she sicked you on me," Gilson said harshly.

"No, Mr. Gilson. I happened to see you at a restaurant yesterday—"

Gilson interrupted, saying, "The one time I see Joan in years, I'm tailed by the cops—"

Rodriguez took back the ball, saying sharply, "What did you see her for?"

"All right, all right," Gilson said angrily. "I don't think it's any of your business, but anyway—I got a call from her to meet her there. I went because she said it was about Blake O'Malley's will. Joan was the old gas bag's secretary."

"Was Mrs. Gilson taken care of in the will?"

"What are you asking questions like that for?"

"Because it may have a bearing on the death of Mr. O'Malley and on the death of other people."

"In that case, I'll tell you all I know," said Gilson. "O'Malley took care of her, all right." He stopped to laugh ironically. "This is how he figured out things for his own amusement. He put his assets in a trust, with Joan to receive a thousand dollars a month for life, providing she never went back to me and providing we were never divorced in an American court of law. If she didn't comply with those terms, all his money in trust would go to a freshwater college in Ohio, in O'Malley's home town."

"So Mrs. Gilson asked you not to rock the boat, so she could draw down the grand?"

"I thought she was driving at that at first. But she didn't do exactly that because of one thing—the voting rights connected with the Compo-Guidance stock. O'Malley named her, and not the trust, as the one to vote his fifty thousand shares at board meetings. That is, if she compiled with the other terms."

Joe Rodriguez said, "She had a real good reason for contacting you, to save her power to vote on C-G policies. And that meant to protect herself."

"You guessed it. She offered me a deal: three-quarters of her one-

thousand dollars monthly handout, if things would stay put for at least two years. Graham and Paisley urged me to accept. They said the two years would give them time to stabilize the company. What those jokers meant, of course, was time for them to take over themselves and boot out troublemakers. Like they booted out Iliff and a few other nice guys."

"What do you know about Maurice Iliff, Mr. Gilson?"

Gilson looked away, as if lost in regretful thought. He said, "In those years, when Joan and I were together, I knew Iliff and his wife well. We had many high old times together. On the beach. Fishing. Skiing. But the old gas bag changed all that. Stole my wife on me while I was busy running this club. Pretty soon she was thinking only of money and a vice-president title." He stopped to laugh bitterly.

Rodriguez decided the time had come for the testing jolt. He said, "Did you poison the champagne, Gilson?"

The big man sprang up as if to fight, then remembered in time that he was being officially questioned by a police officer. To assult him would be a felony.

"Sorry," Gilson said. "I didn't mean that." He sat down. Rodriguez grinned, thinking that the ex-fullback was a likable square.

"I had absolutely nothing to do with anybody's death," Gilson said. "But I'll tell you, I wasn't surprised when O'Malley got it. He was inviting it for years, running out of friends fast."

"What about Arendorf? What caused that? I doubt if he just plain drowned."

"Whoever is plotting to finesse his way to the top in C-G, with all that big dough at stake—whoever is doing that, he wanted to take Arendorf out of play before Hans got a head start and barred the door."

"Thanks," said Rodriguez. "We'll be in touch with you."

Rodriguez' speculation was that Red Gilson, though disarming in talk and manner, should still be kept on the suspect list. If he was indeed innocent, he might still get to thinking of the easy money waiting, or of something else more or less legally waiting: the accident-causing attractions of the girl with the photogenic cheek bones, the green eyes, and the live chestnut hair.

## VI

DRIVING slowly back along neighborhood side streets, where he could think, as he seldom could on the rat-race freeways, Rodriguez considered the implications of the O'Malley will. Who stood to gain most by O'Malley's death? The answer would come out only as 'any of many.' A discouraging answer for a detective.

If Joan Gilson were one of the

plotters, the stock voting proviso now gave her greater power than she had ever enjoyed before, contrary to Bert Kelly's opinion.

The Iliff death, Rodriguez reasoned, indicated that Iliff was on Arendorf's side and had perhaps contacted Hans Arendorf immediately after the death of O'Malley. Iliff knew something. That something could have been the details of an upcoming move to oust Arendorf, as the crude postcard indicated.

If Bennett now was impatient and demanded action, Rodriguez swiftly decided, he would recommend that surveillance be put on all seven vice-presidents. With phone taps, mail cover, bugs, and tails, it could be expected that some V-P's would be thus eliminated as suspects. Those remaining could then be brought in for questioning in a full-scale attempt to break down the integrity of their stories. So Joe Rodriguez enthusiastically reasoned, waiving consideration of two things: manpower and police budget.

Bennett listened to this somewhat routine proposal—and promptly blew up.

"Joe, you're slipping," he said savagely. He was mad and his eyes glistened cold. "You make it sound like FBI stuff. Put on the brakes, man. I would have to ask for four extra people from Central Detective Division to do a job that big. They might take the case away from us, do you realize that? It would be a black eye all over the department."

As the veteran continued in this vein, waxing louder of voice and burning his cigar tip bright red, Jose Juan Rodriguez wished that he had not made such a damn fool suggestion. He had assumed too much, forgotten a very important personal angle. Fred Bennett would never make captain by having cases taken away from him.

An emergency buzz of the lieutenant's phone ended the Bennett lecture. Rodriguez was glad for this. He always felt like a high school drop-out when the Old Man bore down on him.

Lieutenant Bennett held the phone tight to his left ear and abruptly waved a hand at Rodriguez to take the office extension line and listen.

". . . a witness said he seemed to be making a dog-splash dive and so they thought nothing until he

didn't come up . . ." the reporting voice said.

Bennett called out to Rodriguez, "It's Gilson. Santa Monica Canyon Club."

The voice on the phone went on, saying, "So that's all we got now, sir. The man gulps down a poolside cocktail, supposedly a Screwdriver, collapses into the water, is dead and his face knotted up. Looks like poisoning. The Gilson corpse is on the way to the coroner's office."

"That could be our break," Bennett said excitedly. "Okay, Joe. Call the shot. It's your case."

"We could use a quick cover on Joan Gilson's apartment, since it's her undivorced husband," said Rodriguez. "She may be next in line."

"Okay. I'll ask West Los Angeles to handle it. Next?"

"I'd say let me bring her in, lieutenant. We could make it like protective custody. That would give you a real chance to work on her."

Fred Bennett now brightened. Rodriguez saw that he had scored with the indirect praise of his superior's well-known ability to extract information from unwary people.

"Take Kelly in a prowl car," said Bennett. "On the way, you can admire this masterpiece."

As the car with the black and white markings sped along Santa Monica Boulevard, Rodriguez opened the envelope. Amateur artist Ed Brown, the apple knocker waiter, here presented in crayons his impressions of the unknown man who had readied the death glass of champagne for Blake O'Malley.

It was a pretty fair piece of country art: a man with standard Nordic features, a pencil-line moustache previously unmentioned by the waiters, and a notable head of wavy black hair. The unknown came close to looking like an older Beatle.

Rodriguez thought some moments, recalling the types he had seen at work around C-G, around Malibu, and around the Santa Monica Canyon Club premises. He decided that he had never before seen a character like that.

At the Admin. Division, Joan Gilson was not in her office. From the girl executive's own girl secretary, he learned that Joan Gilson was making a helicopter trip to the Vultania Division plant. She would not return for the balance of the evening.

Rodriguez told Officer Kelly to go to the Lanai Serrano Tower. This time he wanted to check on the surveillance of the West Los Angeles officer and arrange with him to be notified immediately when Joan Gilson showed up.

In the basement garage of the tower, Kelly simply told the attendant they were checking on no-show traffic ticket offenders. He and Rodriguez then took the garage

service elevator to the tenth floor.

On the tenth floor at the very door of the woman's apartment, Rodriguez and Kelly came upon a gent who had to be their helper: an overalled janitor type who was mulching and trimming exotic purple vines in the decorative doorfront planters.

"She's in there now," the gardener said. "Arrived half an hour ago with a bushy-haired guy—"

The flat set of Rodriguez's eyes sharpened. "Like this guy?" he asked, pulling the amateur art out of the envelope.

"Except for the thin moustache, that's her pigeon," the gardener said.

"Call Lieutenant Bennett," Rodriguez said. "Have him send a cage to the garage and wait."

He motioned a cocked thumb to Kelly, who drew his service pistol and stood to one side. Rodriguez pressed the door button in a long ring. Not until twenty seconds or more passed by did the door finally open.

Joan Gilson peered out. The photogenic cheekbones flushed pink as she recognized Rodriguez and noted the uniform on Kelly.

"It's necessary to come in," said Rodriguez. He shoved the door wider.

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Gilson. "I was dressing to keep an appointment. What is it you wish, Mr. Rodriguez?"

"I have a warrant to enter and search," said Rodriguez evenly. To Kelly, he said, "Step in."

Mrs. Gilson retreated in a frustrated silence. Rodriguez motioned her to a king-size davenport in the rich living room. He then faced into a doorway leading to the several other rooms by a corridor, and held his service pistol at the ready.

"You can come out now," Rodriguez called through the doorway.

A small crackle of noise sounded from down the hallway. Rodriguez cat-walked down the corridor. At the end he saw that it led into a kitchen. He walked in.

Matt Bachwald stood by a picture window in the kitchen. A tray of rum drinks cluttered the table by his side.

"Rodriguez," he said with a grin. "I wondered what was up. Sit down. Have a drink. Tell me why you're here."

"Suppose you tell me why *you're* here," said Rodriguez. His eyes were motionless, directing a glacier stare at Bachwald.

The PR man remained silent. Rodriguez motioned him to proceed down the hall. The drawn .38 was a convincer.

In the living room, Rodriguez said to Kelly, "Check the rooms for a black wig." Kelly left.

"I was doing a confidential inspection job for Joan," said Bachwald. "I used the wig as a little disguise."

At the words, Rodriguez noted, Joan Gilson suddenly ceased to

look like a pretty girl. Her classical poise twisted up in rills of hate.

"Oh, no, he wasn't," she said to Rodriguez. "This man is trying to implicate me in something I know nothing about. Take him away and let him explain in jail."

Bachwald regarded her with a startled expression, but he said nothing.

"Why did he accompany you home, then?" said Rodriguez.

"He didn't," she said. "He was in the garage when I drove in. In fact, I didn't know at first it was Matt Bachwald, on account of the disguise. He said, 'I have to see you,' and insisted on coming up the elevator. He kept saying, 'I have something big to tell you.' But he kept stalling and never said much of anything. I don't know what he's done. I don't know why he's here. The only thing I know is I have to rush back to the board of directors meeting."

"I don't think you'll be doing that," said Rodriguez. "Mrs. Gilson, you are under the protective custody of Los Angeles police as of now and you will return with me to the station house."

She cried, "What?" and slumped back on the davenport, stunned.

Officer Kelly now returned to the room. He appeared exasperated. He said to Rodriguez, "Two women's wigs, but no black Beatle job. Shall I turn the place upside down?"

"Not yet," the young plainclothesman said. "Where is it, Bachwall?"

"First, let me say a word for the record," said the PR man. His face was a rough draft of stubborn pride. "I've protected Joan Gilson long enough. Now she's trying to get out from under the blame and make me the goat. It's not going to work. It's not going to stand up in court. She's a cold-blooded, skillful schemer, Rodriguez. She knew the terms of the O'Malley will and she knew the price she would have to pay Blake O'Malley for his so-called generosity. That price was to be his unofficial wife. She told me then she wanted him out of the way before the wife bit started."

Rodriguez asked, "What was your own price, Bachwald?"

Joan Gilson stirred to attention at the words and said, "This man turned killer to feather his own nest. He came to me after he poisoned Blake and he said he wanted Butler Graham's job, title, and salary—and Graham fired. He was at the fringes of all the cliques and feuds at C-G and he was itching to climb the ladder into the big money. Blake disliked him, in fact was ready to fire him for disloyalty."

At this, Matt Bachwald grinned wryly. Rodriguez judged that the man was immensely pleased with himself for having reflexed the woman into revelations. The detective decided to try to keep the word duel going strong. After all, Bachwald did not seem to realize that he

could be arrested at any moment that Rodriguez chose.

Officer Kelly, on the other hand, was anticipating fast action. His right hand under his coat clasped a pair of handcuffs.

"She just outsmarted herself," said Bachwald," one time after another. Maurice Iliff threatened to make a stink with the board of directors. So she marked him for liquidation. Hans Arendorf let it be known that he was going to get rid of V-Ps all over the place, including Joan, and bring back the people who had been fired. So Arendorf got it. The last man was comparatively innocent, just acting a bit too independent for her plans. Her husband—"

"You didn't," Joan Gilson shouted, jumped up, and with arms flailing, ran toward Bachwald. "You couldn't do that."

"Your husband is dead, Mrs. Gilson," said Rodriguez. "He got the same treatment O'Malley got. In different surroundings. Poolside at the Santa Monica Canyon Club."

She broke down into hysterical sobbing.

Kelly steered her into a side room and let her drop down on a chaise lounge.

## VII

ALONE NOW with the PR man, Rodriguez looked Bachwald straight in the eyes and said, "You are under arrest on suspicion of murder. You may have a lawyer and make your plea in hearing court. If you plead innocence, you may submit to a polygraph to reinforce your claim. Now, show me where you hid the wig."

Bachwald reacted almost automatically, as if the strong words had somehow soothed him into rationality.

"Back in the kitchen," he said, and walked on ahead.

Rodriguez followed, with his .38 out front.

In the kitchen, Bachwald pointed to the window, saying, "If you look out there, you'll see it on the offset roof two stories below, near the lights. I threw it out the window, but not far enough."

Rodriguez stepped to the window. He was careful to keep the figure of Matt Bachwald in the corner of his left eye. The hefty rum bottle on the table might prove too inviting a weapon.

Rodriguez looked out briefly. A black object lay on the offset ledge, illuminated by the surface lighting. Then Rodriguez moved back. As he did so, his eye caught a flash of movement. He wheeled around. Matt Bachwald held a rum glass high to his head and was drinking in a swift gulp.

Then he doubled up, grasped at his chest, and toppled over to the kitchen floor.

Rodriguez smelled the spill of rum and caught its tamarind fra-

grance. Suicide. He studied the gun-barrel stare of the stricken man and decided that there was no use trying to do anything for an expert in mixing deadly little hydrocyanic cocktails.

Who would ever know whom that one was originally intended for? Joan Gilson? Some C-G official coming along later to the apartment?

Or even Jose Juan Rodriguez, providing he had been silly enough to be conned into taking a friendly drink?

Rodriguez rushed back to the living room and instructed Kelly to call the meat wagon. Then he went to the side room and told Joan Gilson to put on a coat and come along with him. He did not tell her that Bachwald was dead in her kitchen.

At the door of the cage car which waited with its uniformed driver in the basement garage, Rodriguez said, "Be my guest." The light mood was deliberate, to encourage talk enroute to De Longpre Avenue.

"This is a substitute for cuffs," he said. "I'll sit in back here with you, so it looks like we're both getting hauled in."

Joan Gilson grimaced and stepped into her ungilded cage. Presently she recovered her poise sufficiently for feminine curiosity to assert itself.

"I don't know how you tracked down Bachwald," she said, "but you got the right man. I'll help you with any kind of a statement you want me to sign."

"He's willing to make a statement too," Joe Rodriguez lied. "He's naming you."

"Ridiculous," she said hotly. "He committed all the murders. But, of course, he'll claim I egged him on."

"Did you?"

"Never. It was this way. He fell in love with me, so he said. That was when my husband and I decided to separate."

Rodriguez interrupted, saying, "Did you or did Mr. Gilson decide to separate?"

"I guess it was mostly my idea. Blake O'Malley took a fancy to me and I couldn't resist the chance to get promotion and big money—and make a fortune for Red and me to share later on. I could not explain such a thing to Galahad Bachwald, to Blake, or to anybody else. All I could do was see Red on rare occasions to be sure he was keeping his part of the lousy bargain."

Thinking of this last many-splendored thing, Rodriguez' attention wandered to the streams of night traffic surrounding the cage car on Santa Monica Boulevard. Many people in cars were ogling the two in the cage. Joe Rodriquez considered that some of the observers were saying out loud, "Wonder what's the rap on that cute little broad?"

Rodriguez resumed his quest, saying, "But Blake O'Malley spoiled all that when he wanted some real dividends on his investment?"

"That's about what happened, yes. All at once. Blake was setting up a yacht trip to Ensenada for me the day after the anniversary banquet. Crazy Matt threw a fit. He imagined me an innocent country girl being taken advantage of. I should have regarded him seriously when he said the yacht trip would never take place and that the world would be better off without Blake O'Malley."

"Just how could a PR man get hold of hydrocyanic acid and know how to use it?"

"Check the fine print in the personnel files, Mr. Rodriguez. He flunked out of college, trying first for pre-med and then for pharmacy. He had executive access to Compo-Guidance chemical stores. He knew what to steal and how to use it."

"Go on," said Rodriguez. "Let's consider this a rehearsal for what you are going to dictate to our stenographer. Okay, after this murder of passion, as the papers use the phrase, why did he go after Iliff? That was a cold-blooded thing to do, assault an alcoholic."

"Maurice Iliff telephoned Butler Graham, accusing Graham of trying to take the police off the trail. Iliff said he was going to talk to C-G director friends and force a public investigation. Matt Bachwald acted to prevent this. Matt regarded himself as a superman by now. Then Arendorf was elected to the top job. Matt acted on his own again. This time he feared that I would be fired and there would go his own chance to get a finger in the pie. I never egged him on to do any of these horrible things. He did them and told me afterwards. You'll have to believe me, Mr. Rodriguez. Good Lord above, would I set him to murdering my own husband?"

Rodriguez said evenly, "There's always the lie detector test to back you up. I'd suggest you ask for a polygraph right away. It may save you some real trouble."

The cage car by now was turning off Santa Monica Boulevard, heading north on Wilcox for De Longpre. Time just for a few more questions, Rodriguez judged.

"What ever influenced you," said Rodriguez, "to separate from your husband? Was money that important?"

"You tell me," she replied. "I'm not sure about much of anything any more. All I know is I was sick and tired of working a switchboard at the Santa Monica Canyon Club, watching my husband bow and smile like a big shot to the members. I figured I'd be there thirty years from now, still living in that back cottage next to the caddy house.

"One day I decided I'd had it. I answered an ad by a new company called Compo-Guidance. I was lucky. Everybody seemed to like me. Soon I was making more than my husband. The company mushroomed into a giant of the aerospace industry. That's when I took the wrong road. A million dollars, I thought, was not impossible to make in this fabulous setup. It really made sense.

"In addition to salary, there were tips on stock rises, a chance to invest in the supplier people who sold parts to C-G. If we separated I would be in a position to advance fast. Few ever get that kind of break. I took it. That's my story, Mr. Joe Rodriguez. And now I guess I've got a lifetime of regret ahead, without Red. The big square was worth more than the money."

The detective said no more as the cage car arrived in the east bay of the station house. He did not care to enlighten Joan Gilson right now. In due time, she would learn what he might have said to her. Part of that lifetime ahead for Joan Gilson would be spent at Corona women's prison, in cottage-like detention similar to her days at the club.

She would get this term of servitude because she, like Matt Bachwald, had come to regard herself as beyond the law, and, as such, not obliged to report to the authorities such trifling little matters as murders.

Joe Rodriguez had no qualms about not telling this beautiful accident-causer of her sad omissions. Lieutenant Fred Bennett, would do that, all in good time. Now she was just another person with a debt to pay society.

The young detective opened the cage door, stepped out, and said, "Okay, Joan. All out for Disneyland."

# HOMECOMING

## by PAUL W. FAIRMAN

*A man with a future . . . a woman with a past . . . a little lost boy who held the key to both lives . . .*

LEE MASON rang the bell of the Gramercy Park mansion a little after midnight. The door opened instantly. Mason gave his name and said, "Federal Bureau of Investigation. I think Mr. Frank Trevor is expecting us."

The man inside nodded. "I'm Trevor. You'll have to pardon me. Our butler is old and pretty slow. Please come in."

As Trevor closed the door after them, Mason indicated his two companions—"Neal Spencer, Adam Graff—" and presented his credentials. Trevor inspected them dutifully while Mason looked him over.

Early to mid-thirties; a strong face capable of hiding shock; a

man to whom wealth and position were not affectations but integral facets of life.

A man who would instinctively apologize for answering his own door.

Mason already had other data. Trevor was worth a couple of million—partly inherited, mostly earned. A corporation lawyer of stature and importance.

Trevor said, "I assume I was right in calling you. Going straight to the top seemed logical."

There had been a technicality. The FBI was not supposed to move on cases such as this for a fixed number of hours. But top-level request for cooperation could legitimately set aside the ruling.

Lee Mason, however, saw no point in going into this with Trevor. He said, "You were wise to act immediately."

"Would you like to see the room?"

"I'd rather talk with you first. Perhaps someone could show Mr. Spencer and Mr. Graff where it is."

"Certainly." The old and slow butler appeared from nowhere to lead them upstairs.

"We can talk in the library," Trevor said.

Mason found the library properly luxurious. He sat down in an overstuffed chair and allowed Trevor two quick turns across the acre-sized carpet before stopping him. "I'd like a description of the boy. You have photos, of course."

"Yes." Trevor stood with his hands behind his back staring at a spot over the vast fireplace. He spoke as though reading from a report. "William Edmund Trevor—age, twelve years, two months. Weight, approximately one-ten. Light complexion, brown hair, blue eyes. No identifying marks or scars."

Mason was taking notes as Trevor turned to face him. "I got home as usual, around eleven and worked for a while here in the library. Then I went upstairs. I'm in the habit of looking in on the boy before retiring. That was when I found the window open, the ladder, the chloroformed rag, and Billy gone. It—it was difficult to believe."

Trevor took another quick turn. "If I'd gone upstairs earlier— But I had no reason to suspect—"

"Blaming yourself is a waste of time, Mr. Trevor."

"Billy was a fine boy; far above the intelligence level of his age-group. I was very proud of him." The executive front was beginning to crack a little now. Trevor had paled visibly. He kept flexing his fists.

Mason was regarding him narrowly. "There's one more question."

"Yes?"

"The boy's mother?"

Trevor jerked sharply and said, "Oh, I completely forgot!" He hur-

ried to the phone and after he'd dialed, he said, "Belle went to the theater with friends, the Olsens. She must have stopped off at their place for a drink on the way home."

The wait was over-long. Trevor scowled. "I should have called before. But I was stunned, not thinking properly."

Someone evidently answered, because Trevor turned half away to speak into the phone. "Jack? This is Frank Trevor. I must speak to Belle. It's very important. She—What was that?"

Mason caught the slight lift of Trevor's shoulders; saw his fingers tighten on the edge of the table. But he recovered quickly. "Oh, I see. Sorry I routed you out so late. Belle and I must have gotten our wires crossed. Thanks, Jack."

Trevor put the phone down and turned. He spoke in a tight formal voice. "I'm sure my wife will be home shortly."

"Good. I'd like to take a look at the room, now . . ."

* * *

Mason looked down over the jutting ladder into the court below. "Anything?"

Spencer's light bobbed as though in exasperation. His voice floated upward, hollow in the dim court. "All cement and thick turf. No footprints."

Mason turned back into the room. He seemed preoccupied. Graff, the third agent, waited.

"What's with it?" Mason asked.

"Four people on the domestic staff. All accounted for." Graff raised a camera, training it on a child's blackboard against the far wall. He said, "The butler identified the ladder. It came from a tool shed out back."

"How convenient,"Mason muttered. He was studying the message chalked on the board: *Wait For Instructions.* It's downward slant and slovenly lettering was far too elaborate to be other than intentional.

Frank Trevor stood in the doorway. With a nod of his head, he indicated a wad of chloroformed gauze on the bed. "I wonder why they left that?"

"Maybe they had more than one." Mason waited until Graff snapped his picture before asking, "What about the local precinct?"

"I talked to a Captain Tenners. He asked for technical representation during the preliminaries. He's sending two men. I'll let them patrol the grounds?"

"Right. Do they know what it is?"

"They think it was burglary."

"Good. Keep it tight. No leaks if we can help it."

"I've got a print man coming. Then I'll question the staff."

"Do that. I'll be downstairs . . ."

Mason and Trevor were in the library when Belle Trevor arrived. Her entrance was dramatic. She appeared in the doorway and said,

"Frank! There's a man on the porch. He questioned me. What on earth has happened?"

Frank Trevor stared in silence. Lee Mason stared also. She was a striking woman indeed. She wore a crimson dress with a low bodice and flaring skirt. A mink stole had fallen from her shoulders. Her black hair was drawn back tight off a high forehead, away from rather plain features.

But the plainness made no difference. Belle Trevor was electric. One of those rare women who radiate sex as a musky, elemental essence, a seldom-bestowed gift that set her apart.

Trevor broke the silence.

"How was the show? he asked coldly.

The question startled her. "The show? Frank! I want to know what's happened."

Mason took her gently by the arm. "Perhaps you'd better sit down." He'd half expected her to shrug him off, but she allowed herself to be led to a chair, her eyes never leaving the cold, expressionless face of her husband.

Trevor said, "I called the Olsens. They hadn't seen you." Then, catching Mason's expression, he went on before she could answer. "I realize I'm in bad taste, bringing this subject up before a stranger, but I'd rather Mr. Mason heard it here, from us, than elsewhere."

Belle Trevor's face was a study in bewilderment and Mason answered the question in her eyes. "I'm an agent of the FBI, Mrs. Trevor. It appears that your son has been kidnaped."

Belle Trevor's hand came together in a pathetic gesture, her inner panic attested by the whitening of her knuckles and a tightening around her mouth. "Billy—kidnaped? When?"

"We can't be sure. Sometime before eleven, we believe."

"I—I suppose everything possible is being done."

Mason sensed the trite question for what it was, a plea for time to adjust to this stunning news. He said, "That's right, Mrs. Trevor."

"What exactly do you do?"

"Many well-trained men go into action at once. Among other things, your staff will be questioned and checked. We will trace any persons who have left your employ. We will look to your husband's acquaintances and contacts." Mason paused. "And yours also, Mrs. Trevor."

Trevor gave her no more time. "Who is the man, Belle?"

She answered without hesitation. "His name is Victor Redding. He is an artist with a studio at two hundred and ninety-seven East Sixty-eighth Street."

As Mason took out his notebook, Trevor's eyebrows bunched. "I think I recall him. Big, blond, stocky. I seem to remember drinks. Some cocktail party or other."

"At the Giffords, two months ago. The Bohemian with the reputation for few morals and no scruples."

"A reputation that attracted you, no doubt."

Belle flushed as she arose from the chair. "He interested me for other reasons. He's very gay. He laughs a great deal. I think he's had a lot of experience with lonely females. He seems to know what to do about them."

"I'm sure Mr. Mason won't regard that as pertinent."

"You opened the subject, Frank, so we'll let Mr. Mason classify as he sees fit."

Her aggressiveness dented Trevor's hostility somewhat. "But why, Belle? Why?"

"We'll by-pass the old cliches—references to your eternal preoccupation with business; your mad passion to represent every corporation in existence. These things afford a poor defense, really, because I'm sure many husbands come home only to change their shirts and still boast faithful wives.'"

"Belle! I refuse to listen to—"

She was like a woman who'd thrown herself into the sea and now had to swim across or perish. "You'll listen. Husbands don't walk out on the confessions of philandering wives."

Outrage flared in Trevor's face and Mason looked to a quiet exit. But as Belle Trevor took a deep breath and plunged on, he was still in his chair.

"I'm thoroughly ashamed of myself for hiding behind friends. That was cheap. But I'll not grovel nor ask forgiveness. For want of a better defense I'll claim that a portion of my life belongs to me to do with as I see fit."

"But how can you—?"

"Frank, I have never pried into your personal affairs. I've never

called your office after five. For all I know you could be making regular trips to Philadelphia."

Trevor now radiated cold fury. "Madam. May I remind you that your son has been abducted?"

Mason realized Belle Trevor had hardly been aware of her own words. Her outburst had been a barricade thrown up hastily by a proud woman. She said, "No, I don't have to be reminded. Now I'd like to go to his room."

Mason picked up her stole and handed it to her as she left the library. Afterwards, he could still feel the electricity through the room.

Trevor passed a hand across his forehead. "I'm deeply humiliated,

handled the whole thing badly. Owe you an apology."

"That's not necessary. Why don't you try to get a little rest? There is nothing either you or Mrs. Trevor can do at the present moment."

Trevor did not appear to hear. After checking his notes, Mason went upstairs to Billy's room, where he found a lab man dusting the window frame.

"Did a lady come in here? Mrs. Trevor?"

"I guess that's who it was. She was having a pretty rough time. I guess she went to her room."

Mason studied the message on the blackboard for a few moments and went out and got into his car and drove to 297 East 68th Street.

When he left the building an hour later, there was a cab parked behind his car. As he approached, Belle Trevor got out and the cab pulled away.

"I've been waiting for you," she said.

"How did you know I was here?"

"It was a guess. Until I saw the car."

"May I drive you home?"

"Please . . ."

On 5th Avenue, driving south, Mason asked, "Why did you follow me?"

"I had to know about Victor. Did you accuse him?"

"Not directly. I questioned him, but I don't think he had anything to do with it. I didn't think so when I came, but every possibility has to be checked."

"You're sure he's innocent?"

"I can't be sure of anything. But at present it's a strong probability. That's all."

After a few moments, he glanced over at her. "You seem disappointed."

"Perhaps I am. Knowing it was Victor would have helped, because he's no killer. Billy would be safe."

"I'm sure he isn't a killer, nor a kidnaper. But he might try a less dangerous crime, like persuading a woman to give him money." Mason regretted adding that last. It was none of his business.

But he'd said it and Belle Trevor's eyes turned his way quickly. "You think I'm vile, don't you?"

"Of course not."

"I'm sorry. The question was unfair, but I say the wrong things invariably. I have a talent for saying and doing the wrong things. I'm a failure at everything I try."

He wanted to stop her but didn't quite know how. Then she was again plunging on. "This affair of mine would have ended close to its beginning if Victor hadn't been the soul of deliberation. It only recently reached the sparring stage. Anyhow, tonight I broke it off, finished it. But of course I couldn't tell Frank that."

"Why not?"

Her quick laugh was brittle with misery. "Because it represents another failure. I failed as a wife, as

a mother, and now as a—" She didn't finish the sentence. "No doubt I was wrong, but there in the library I would rather have been considered a successfully unfaithful wife than confess another failure."

"You haven't meant a tenth of what you've said tonight. Most of it has been distortion produced by shock and a sense of guilt."

"But I am guilty."

"Of being wealthy enough to pay a kidnaper's price. And of nothing more so far as the abduction is concerned."

"You will get Billy back, won't you?"

"Our chances are very good."

As they pulled up before the Gramercy Park mansion, she said, "We can pay a great deal of money. We can borrow on the house if necessary. Even sell the Westchester place."

"We'll know more about that angle of it when the instructions come. That should be tomorrow." He got out and went around and opened the door for her.

"And the rest of it—what you found—isn't important, really. You understand that, don't you? Frank—myself—neither of us are important now."

"I understand."

"And I'm sorry that I—"

He brushed the apology away almost brusquely and got back into the car and drove away . . .

Mason got an hour's sleep that morning, from nine to ten. Then the phone awoke him. Adam Graff said, "We've got trouble."

"It broke?"

"Wide open. Through the police station some way. Tenner's sharpening his axe, but it's too late."

Mason put his feet on the floor and faced this possibly disastrous development. He wasted no time cursing fate. "What's the reaction?"

"Big. New York millionaire. Glamor stuff. Lots of color."

"And lots of help."

"You said it. The phones are hot. The kid's been spotted in twenty different places already."

"Anything that sounds worthwhile?"

"Who can tell? He was seen on Long Island with two men in a car. A woman saw him walking down the street in Newark, New Jersey at five o'clock this morning, carrying a shoe shine box—the same time a milk wagon driver spotted him in a car with a woman in the Bronx. He was also in Syracuse around that time, not to mention points as far west as central Ohio."

"How are the followups going?"

"We're eliminating them as fast as we can through local police."

"Okay. I'm going to Gramercy Park. Contact me there."

After Graff hung up, Mason sat on the edge of the bed and smoked a cigarette, watching the smoke curl up toward the ceiling. Any answers it might have spelled out

were not apparent in his face as he snubbed out the butt and went in to shave. Thirty-five minutes later, he pushed his way through the crowd outside Trevor's home and on through the photogs and reporters at the door.

The butler told him Trevor was in the library. Mason tapped on the closed door and entered.

Trevor was pacing the floor. He wore a blue pin-striped business suit, a blue shirt, a subdued blue necktie, and a look of anger. He said, "Well, you bungled it beautifully, Mason."

"I'm sorry."

Trevor pointed to the headline of the paper he'd been slapping against his thigh. "It appears that you've deputized every man, woman and child in the nation."

Trevor threw the paper on the table. Mason picked it up. The story had broken with a vengeance all right. Mason wondered where they'd gotten Billy's picture, but didn't ask.

Trevor said, "Phoning in reports on my son's whereabouts has become a national pastime."

"I would have given a lot to prevent this, but now we can only hope it works to our benefit."

"I can't see how that would be possible. Billy is probably dead by this time."

"Let's not assume the worst. Help from local law-enforcement agencies has been valuable in other cases."

"You're hedging."

Mason felt heat under his collar. "It's a waste of time lashing out at newspapers or anyone else. As a rule they're most cooperative. This time, something went wrong. I don't know what. I'll take the blame, if it will make you feel better."

Trevor reversed himself quickly. "I'm sorry, Mason. I know you're doing your best. What's the next step?"

"We wait for the ransom note."

"And hope it will come."

"In the meantime, I'd like to go over the premises. There are a few points—"

"I want one thing understood before you go."

"Yes?"

"Nothing of a personal nature, nothing between Mrs. Trevor and myself, is going to complicate this matter in any way."

"I hope not."

"Mrs. Trevor's accounting to me will be strictly on the situation involved. I'm not holding her responsible for Billy's abduction in any way."

"I got the impression last night that you didn't consider her of any importance, so far as Billy is concerned."

My big mouth again, Mason thought, but he knew he had to finish it when Trevor asked, "What are you getting at?"

"Last night you came home and found your son missing. You called

us. You did several other things. But until I got here and asked about her, you made no attempt to get in touch with your wife. An oversight due to shock, I believe you called it."

Trevor's eyes blazed. "Our relations are none of your affair."

"That's right. But you can't separate situations by declaration. Sometimes they overlap and there's nothing you can do about it."

Out in the yard, Mason congratulated himself. He said, *Nice going, blabbermouth*, and began digging around in the incinerator. After that, he covered the grounds thoroughly and was busy in the basement when the butler came down to say, "Mr. Trevor asks that you come to the library, if you'll be so kind."

Mason glanced at his watch. It was three o'clock. "What's up?"

"I think, sir, that the ransom note has arrived."

Mason went to the library and found Mrs. Trevor there with her husband. She wore a pale blue housecoat and she sat by the fireplace, her hands tightly folded in her lap.

Trevor stood beside her, holding a special delivery letter by one corner. "I imagine this gets special treatment."

Mason took the envelope, handling it casually. It was postmarked *Newark, New Jersey* and time-stamped 9:55 A.M. The address had been printed in red crayon

with the same attempts at illiteracy that he'd found on the blackboard.

He used more care in removing the contents. Then the three of them were reading it: WAIT FOR FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS.

"The publicity *has* frightened them," Trevor growled.

Belle Trevor gripped her husband's arm. "Do you really think they've—?"

Mason said, "I think this note is grounds for optimism."

"By what strange logic do you arrive at that conclusion?" Trevor demanded.

"This letter was delivered in six hours. That means it was posted after the story was in the papers. So I think the indications are exactly the opposite. They weren't scared off. They want to do business."

Trevor considered this. "But this hellish waiting—"

'It's natural for them to be cautious. I realize the pressure you're under." He went over and stood by the fireplace for a few moments, then spoke suddenly.

"Your place in Westchester—it's quite secluded I believe. Why not let me drive you up there for the night? You're both going to need some rest or you'll crack up. There's nothing you can do here."

Trevor's face was drawn. He scowled. "Suppose something happens here? Suppose word comes —"

"We can be back in forty-five minutes if we have to."

Trevor looked at his wife. Belle Trevor shrugged listlessly. She said nothing.

"How soon can you be ready?" Mason asked . . .

* * *

They left quietly through the service entrance, their leaving putting headlines on the newsstands a short time later: TREVORS LEAVE HOME MYSTERIOUSLY.

Mason drove, with Trevor and Belle in the back seat. He caught their faces and movements occasionally in the mirror. Belle Trevor stared straight ahead. She smoked endless cigarettes. Each time, Trevor was ready with his lighter. Each time, she thanked him. Mason felt a little sorry for Trevor. Belle was the kind of woman who's very presence melted indignations and angers, however justified.

Mason avoided the direct route, making the trip on side roads to keep newsmen from picking up the trail. Thus, the drive killed the rest of the day. Dusk was falling when they pulled onto the graveled lane that ended in a horseshoe in front of a sprawling, rustic lodge.

A man, outlined against the rustic porch, came forward and Mason had a few words with him. Then the man got into another car and drove away.

"I should have known you'd have this place covered," Trevor said as he helped Belle from the car.

"Routine," Mason answered. "He's taking a coffee break."

The entrance gave directly into a huge living room. Belle Trevor crossed it without stopping and went through a door on the far side. Trevor followed her, pausing only to say, "The place is yours. Liquor in that cabinet there. And you'll probably find Carrie in the kitchen. We keep a couple here the year around."

Mason said, "I'll get along fine," but Trevor had already vanished. Alone, Mason considered a drink, passed it up, and went through the dining room into the kitchen, where he found a plump, gray-haired woman seated at a table shelling peas.

He said, "Hello. I'm Lee Mason. I came with the Trevors."

The woman was startled. "Good gracious. I didn't hear a soul!"

"You're Carrie, aren't you?"

"Heavens. Who else could I be? Are you hungry, young man?"

Mason ran her through his mind. *Caroline Higgins—English born in Liverpool—57 years old—Mar-*

*ried Tom Frankhouse six months after arrival in 1938 through Ellis Island—A citizen—The couple employed by the Trevors since 1948 . . .*

"Yes, I'm a little hungry," Mason said, "but I'd rather wait a bit."

"Tom's out at the stable. We keep a few horses here, you know." She picked some stray peas out of her ample lap and straightened her hair. "I didn't know the Trevors were coming up. I'll have to see to their wants."

Mason sat down on a corner of the table. "They're busy at the moment. Why don't you finish the peas first? Here, I'll help you."

"I would like to get them done. Are you with the police, young man?"

"That's right."

"There were two reporters here this morning. I sent them packing. You'd think they'd leave folks alone in their time of grief."

Mason was looking vaguely around the kitchen. "You and your husband have been with the Trevors a long time, haven't you?"

"Oh, yes. Will you be staying the night?"

"I'm not sure. There are a few points I'd like to check. Maybe you can help me."

"I'll certainly do anything I can."

"Tell me about Billy."

"That I can do. The lad spent a lot of time up here. He was a fine boy, a fine mind. What kind of people would do a thing like this—take a lad away like that?"

"How long since you've seen him?"

"He went back to the city two weeks ago. He liked it up here. So quiet, he was, and thoughtful. Too serious for his age, really. Alone so much, that was the reason. His parents rich and successful and busy. You know how it is this modern day."

"Did he have any hobbies?"

"That he did. He read a lot, but not trash. Useful things. Electricity and such. He and my Tom got on fine together. Tom taught him things that aren't done much these days by folks in the Trevor's class. Woodworking in his shop downstairs and wiring for lights anl such. Billy made the tree house out in the orchard with scarcely any help from John."

Carrie finished the peas. "And now could I get a bite for you? It must have been a long drive."

"No, thanks. Not just now. I think I'll have a look around. I need the exercise."

After he left the kitchen, Mason went to his car and got a flashlight. The darkness was total now. He trained the white spot on the ground and followed it around the north side of the lodge, where he passed close to a pair of open windows. He did not eavesdrop, but he couldn't help hearing Trevor's voice: ". . . and so I think my

own failures are the only important ones, Belle. Perhaps Billy's kidnaping is a punishment for—"

And Belle's reply. "No, Frank! No! the failures were mine and mine alone. And if bitter regret is any—"

The words faded out as Mason moved beyond earshot, moved along a path that wound into the orchard and ended at a large tree from which a rope ladder dangled.

Billy's tree house.

It was a solidly anchored platform with walls supporting a clapboard roof. Good work for a twelve-year-old. It was filled with the things normal to childhood—a cot, a chair, two crossed hatchets on one wall, books, a broken .22 rifle—things that made Billy Trevor seem a pretty normal lad.

Mason sat down on the cot and yawned. It had been a rough day and the orchard was quiet and restful. He lay down and went to sleep.

The creaking of the rope ladder awakened him. He was sitting on the edge of the cot with an unlit cigarette in his hand when a dark form looked up through the trap door.

Mason said, "Its all right, Billy. Don't be afraid."

The answering voice reflected uncertainty rather than fear. "Who —who are you?"

"My name is Mason. I'm an FBI man. I've been waiting for you." As he spoke, Mason snapped on his flash and set it so its light hit the ceiling.

Billy Trevor climbed on up through the trap door. "How did you know I'd come here?"

"I didn't. I was just hoping that you would."

"Then you knew I wasn't kidnaped?"

Mason moved over and the boy sat down wearily beside him. Mason said, "No, I didn't know that, either. I just suspected it. A few things pointed that way."

Billy Trevor considered this, pondered it gravely, before asking, "What things?"

"Well, for instance, it didn't seem logical that a smart kidnaper would take the risk of getting you out of your room in town—through a window, over a high fence—when he could have picked you up out here with hardly any trouble at all."

"That makes sense, all right."

"And there were other small points. I found the chloroform bottle in the incinerator. Where did you get it?"

"Tom uses it out here to kill little animals that get hurt. I took it into town with me a couple of weeks ago."

"Then you'd been planning this?"

"In a way, I guess."

"Where did you leave the shoeshine box?"

"At the foot of the ladder. How did you know about that?"

"A woman saw you in Newark with it and phoned in."

"But a lot of other people phoned in too."

"That's right. But then the second letter came from Newark and I tied the two together. I thought you'd figure that nobody pays much attention to a shoeshine boy."

"That's right. They don't."

"How did you get back here?"

"I came over from Newark on a bus and took the train out. Then I walked over here from the closest station." Billy regarded Mason solemnly. "So you knew it was a fake all the time."

"Not at all. A lot of things pointed in that direction but I could have been wrong. The fact that kidnaping you from the city would have been stupid didn't mean that it couldn't have happened that way. About all I could do was hope I was right."

"How did you know I'd come here?"

"I didn't. It just seemed a logical place for you to relax and think things over."

"I ate candy bars," Billy said. Then: "What will they do to me?"

"I don't know. You caused a lot of excitement and expense. They won't hang you—that's for sure."

"It seemed like a good idea at the time. Then it fell to pieces. I—I didn't have any place to go."

"You've got a place now. Your mother and father are waiting at the lodge."

"Will you kind of tell them before I go in? Pave the way?"

"Sure. Let's go . . ."

The Trevors had come out of their seclusion. Mason found them sitting in front of the fireplace.

"Billy is back," he said. "Everything worked out all right. He's waiting out on the patio."

They came to their feet and stared first at Mason, then at the open French doors. Wordless, they moved as one toward the patio, but Mason caught Belle Trevor gently by the arm. "Billy wasn't kidnaped," he said. "The boy just ran away."

Belle stared blankly. "Ran away? But why? Why did he—?"

"Think a little. You and your husband are busy people, just as many parents are. And children dramatize their resentment in many ways. Some of them break things up, join gangs, become delinquents in their instinctive demand for recognition as individuals. You're lucky to have a boy like Billy. Violence didn't occur to him."

"I'll—I'll never be able to thank you."

"Don't try. The important thing now is the homecoming. I see yours worked out all right. See that Billy's does too."

Later, driving back to town, he was very tired, but the moon had come out and the country was beautiful and it wasn't an unpleasant ride at all.

# BILL BAILEY,
## WON'T YOU PLEASE DROP DEAD!

by JOHN REESE

HORACE O. PALMER bought a quart thermos and had it filled with coffee, heavily creamed and sugared. He ordered four hamburger sandwiches "to go," although he doubted he could keep food down, and craved liquids more than food. The shrimp in the salad must have been lethal, to have made him this sick.

At 8:45 p.m. he used his own key to enter a building on Spring Street, in the Los Angeles financial district. At this hour, the watchman was using the elevator to make his rounds. Hoppy used the stairs, taking his time, being fifty-one years old and in terrible shape. How he had driven all the way from Lake Arrowhead he could not imagine.

As he reached the fourth floor, Hoppy heard the elevator descending, and knew he was safe. His key admitted him to the offices of William Jennings Bryan Bailey, attorney. He groped his way through the suite to the windowless room that, years ago, had been occupied by the most junior member of the staff. Here he could safely turn on a light.

Mr. Bailey had no large staff now, having reduced his practice to a few big cases he could handle himself. This was now Miss Jessie Bell's office, and therefore somewhat sacred to Hoppy.

He sat down at Miss Jessie's desk and got out the books of the Estate of Philip Dubric, Deceased. Hoppy had been an accountant all

*Miss Jessie was a good bookkeeper.*
*But a murder audit takes* rare *skill.*

his life, eight years of it with the Internal Revenue Service. He had a nose for the 'smell' of a bad set of books. The moment he opened these, he caught the reek.

"Oh my God, it's not possible!" he moaned. "She would never do it—not Miss Jessie! She's too good a bookkeeper, and too fine and sweet and decent a woman."

He had to dig back only four months, because up to that time he had kept the Dubric Estate books himself. He began working forward through the books, from the time her handwriting appeared. He had to stop and fortify himself with a sandwich and coffee, and when he kept them down, he felt so much better that the work went faster.

He felt better, that is, until he came to the Coast Fidelity Bank account, which Miss Jessie apparently had opened immediately after taking over the books. It seemed to consist of deposits of cash from liquidation of the Dubric assets, but the amount shocked Hoppy silly. The latest footing showed $280,000 on deposit.

Any such sum as that should long ago have been distributed to the nineteen Dubric heirs. Hoppy could find no record of any accounting to them, or to the probate court. Why? And why deposit it in Coast Fidelity, instead of the bank downstairs, where Mr. Bailey usually banked?

The truth was a long time coming to Mr. Horace O. Palmer—"Hoppy" because of his initials, H.O.P.—and he resisted it as long as he could. Hoppy was a man of average size, healthy and vigorous, a person of moderation in all things. If there was one fierce strain in his character, it was his attachment to Miss Jessie.

But he had to know, and to an accountant, knowledge is not necessarily in the books. Everything in a journal and ledger originates from source documents of some kinds—checks, receipts, bills of sale, vouchers, invoices and the like.

Hoppy got out the file box of source documents on the Dubric Estate. Every document in it bore his own initials, H.O.P. But then, why not? Miss Jessie brought them to him in batches, after she had posted them. Hoppy had his hands full, with other estates, and Miss Jessie was a darned good bookkeeper.

"Do you balance?" he always asked her.

"On the nose," was her invariable reply. And so, being responsible to the court, he had always initialed the documents. Why not? He was the accountant—Miss Jessie just a bookkeeper.

There was no sign of any deposit slip duplicate for an account with Coast Fidelity. If the money was on deposit there, the source documents did not show it.

Almost weeping, he strength-

ened himself with more food and coffee. They stayed down. He turned out the lights before opening the door again, and groped his way back through the suite to Mr. William J. B. Bailey's office.

He was familiar enough with Mr. Bailey's habits to know that his only personal accounts were his check stubs, which he kept on his person. Everything else he threw into the big drawer of his desk on the lower, left-hand side. He dug out bills in batches, paying them when a fee came in. Hoppy had often scolded Mr. Bailey for his carelessness, but the lawyer only laughed.

"Hoppy, what I take in always equals what I pay out, exactly," he said. "I have no children, and I see no reason to leave a lot of money for three ex-wives to fight over. Live it up!"

The desk was locked. Driven to a boldness he had never thought himself capable of. Hoppy jimmied the shallow center drawer with Mr. Bailey's own letter-opener. When this drawer opened, it unlocked all the others.

Hoppy carried the lower, left-hand drawer into Miss Jessie's office, closed the door, and turned on the lights again. Two minutes later, he knew that what Mr. Bailey had been taking in recently did *not* equal what he had been paying out.

And Hoppy knew, too, that this evening he had been very, very close to death. It was not the shrimp at all.

The Arrowhead house—mortgaged to the hilt and delinquent in payments. The Beverly Hills house—also mortgaged, also delinquent. All three alimony accounts delinquent, the total being over $25,000. Mr. Bailey's $8,500 car—bought on time, its $5,000 chattel mortgage delinquent. Credit cards, over $18,000 delinquent. Unpaid bills at stores, airlines, etc.—more than $6,000.

And not a thing to show that the $280,000 from the Dubric Estate was in the bank! Why? Because no such account existed, except in Miss Jessie's books. The money was in cash somewhere, no doubt in a safe-deposit box.

And who was responsible? Horace O. Palmer, the accountant for the estate. Only—had Mr. Bailey's plans worked tonight, Mr. Horace O. Palmer would have been dead by now.

Hoppy could almost hear Mr. Bailey addressing the court: "I was taken in as badly as this court, your honor. I failed my responsibility. I know that my long and, I hope honorable, career is over. What became of the money? We will never know. He probably gambled it away before committing suicide. What a dreadful imposition on this court! Knowing your honor's own peerless record on the bench. . . ."

Bill Bailey was not the lawyer

he had been, fifteen years and three divorces ago, but he still had the eloquent eyebrows, the expressive voice, the handsome face and ready tears that had once made him a magnificent criminal pleader. They worked in civil cases too. He had broken the heart of many a jury, the verdicts later breaking the hearts of banks, underwriters and other moneyed defendants.

But, thought Hoppy—suppose a sorehead judge refused to let the estate take a $280,000 loss without a searching audit? Probate judges became good accountants in time, and suppose this judge demanded source documents. What then? Hoppy knew the answer to that. It was such a short hop to Mexico, and $280,000 made such a small package! Only the sum was probably much more than that.

"I'll bet he's been systematically looting his creditors and the estates he's probating for almost a year!" Hoppy told himself. "Maybe longer. He has collected millions in claims for his clients. Who knows how much of it they got? He could have a million dollars hidden away in Mexico, and with that kind of money, he could stall extradition forever!"

But what about Miss Jessie? Was she a patsy too, or was she in on the deal? Would she go to Mexico with him?

Or did she merely *think* she would go?

Hoppy had reached for the phone to call Bert Kissinger, with whom he had worked at Internal Revenue years ago. They were still good friends. Bert was now an auditor for the district attorney. He was a darned good man, and he had access to all the paraphernalia of prosecution.

The thought of Miss Jessie changed Hoppy's mind. He put the phone back and spent the next thirty minutes ransacking her desk, now truly in tears.

Not a sign of a duplicate deposit slip anywhere.

But he did find a receipt, dated three months back, for $18. It was for six months' rent on a safe-deposit box, and it was in Miss Jessie's name. It was not in Coast Fidelity Bank, but in the bank downstairs, five minutes away from her desk.

Hoppy knew now.

Miss Jessie was in it too. If she were not going to Mexico, she at least thought she was.

*I've got to think this through before I call Bert Kissinger,* Hoppy thought. *It's unthinkable, Miss Jessie and Bill Bailey together. But it's worse still if she's left behind to go to prison.*

More coffee, another hamburger, and an enormous effort of will steadied his nerves. It was Thursday night. The bank would be open tomorrow. On the other hand, it was not unusual for Mr. Bailey to take an extra-long week-end at Arrowhead. The only unusual

thing this time was that he had invited Hoppy to go along.

"We'll batch it, Hoppy," said Mr. Bailey, "and just loaf. Let our whiskers grow and stay nice and mellow. I make the best Manhattans this side of Manhattan, if I do say so."

"I'm not much of a drinking man, you know," said Hoppy.

"It's not how much you drink, Hoppy, but the good you get out of it. Remember that, and you'll never become an alcoholic," said Mr. Bailey, and at the time it had the resonnant reassurance of a Supreme Court ruling.

They reached there at 5:10. Mr. Bailey made a big pitcher of Manhattans. How was a non-drinker like Hoppy to know they were too bitter? He merely sipped his, taking in enough to get good and sick. Mr. Bailey meanwhile was belting them down one after another. He seemed strangely nervous to Hoppy, pacing up and down the big, rustic living-room of the $50,000 'cabin.'

It had been absurdly easy to switch drinks on him—to pick up Mr. Bailey's empty glass, and leave his own full one for Mr. Bailey to snatch up.

The sweat literally popped out on Hoppy's face as he remembered the deft and innocent ease of that switch. He made himself pick up the phone. He dialed the Arrowhead area code, and then Mr. Bailey's number. He let it ring twenty times, and then did it again.

*I did not mean to kill him,* Hoppy thought, *but I did. If two little sips made me this sick, how much poison did he ingest when he gulped down my whole glass? He was too drunk by then to notice the bitter taste.*

He let the phone drop, and picked it up again.

Then he paused, struck by a sudden, blinding idea. There was $280,000—maybe more—in that giant-size safe-deposit box, and Miss Jessie had the key. Mr. Bailey was dead. Instead of being Mr. Bailey's patsies, they had the money.

Yet there was still time to clear himself, at least. He had done no wrong, indeed had never suspected anything wrong until someone during that nightmare ride down from Arrowhead.

Whom should he call—Miss Jessie, or Bert Kissinger?

HOPPY remembered saying, "You ought to get a C.P.A., Mr.

Bailey. Let's face it. I'm a nobody."

"I suppose that's one way of looking at it, Hoppy," Mr. Bailey replied. "But you have a darned good reputation in probate court."

"Thank you, but only on very small estates."

"Yes, and this Dubric Estate is a big one. But it's a mess, and it's mostly the kind of digging you do so well. Dubric died intestate. We have an agreement among the nineteen natural heirs to share on the natural scale of consanguinity. The whole estate is to be liquidated and distributed to them in cash. It will run close to fifteen million dollars, but Dubric cheated on his taxes and that will have to be made up. I would guess that around six million will be distributed, in the end."

"My!" said Hoppy.

"This will take a year, and frankly, I don't want to eat up the estate with the big fees a C.P.A. would charge when you can do it just as well. How would a thousand a month suit you? I know the court and heirs will approve that."

It was twice as much as Hoppy had ever made, and he did love that kind of a digging job. He moved into Mr. Bailey's office and started digging. The nice thing about it was that everybody—the heirs, Mr. Bailey, the court and the tax authorities—all wanted the same thing. Let the just taxes be paid, and divide up what was left.

But if it was a delightful case to work, it was also an educational one. Lately, Hoppy had found himself pondering the proposition that crime, after all, *did* pay. The late Mr. Dubric had cheated about $200,000 a year on his Federal income taxes for the last four years, a total of $800,000. That would have to be made up, plus interest at 6%, plus a 50% fraud penalty—say a million and a half, at least.

But with the money he saved by cheating on his taxes, Mr. Dubric had made investments that were now being liquidated for a profit of over five million dollars! It was an eye opener for Hoppy. If you had the capital, you could make the money—and if you cheated on taxes, you had the capital. How simple it all was, really!

But if the estate was an eye-opener, so was Miss Jessica Bell. Hoppy had the Dubric deal in pretty good shape four months ago, and Mr. W. J. B. Bailey had gotten him three more small estates from the cases he had in probate court. The court was pleased to appoint Hoppy. His books on the Dubric Estate, at that point, were so good that Hoppy had made himself a reputation with everybody.

"No sense in a man of your stature doing simple bookkeeping," said Mr. Bailey. "We can hire a girl to do that. You should be working as a supervising account-

ant, no more, to be fair to the court. I'll get somebody in."

He got in Miss Jessie. Her references were the best, and in half an hour, Hoppy knew that here was the ideal bookkeeper. It was not until he learned to trust her completely that he realized he missed having an excuse to go into the little office Mr. Bailey had assigned to her. He couldn't go on asking a girl of Miss Jessie's caliber for snap balances forever.

Or woman, rather. He could never call her anything but "Miss Jessie," because of a certain wistful dignity that went so well with her dark beauty. She might have been twenty-five or she might have been thirty-five. Her eyes were glorious, her skin perfect, her hands so beautiful that they made an old bachelor like Hoppy catch his breath.

As for her figure, she was not as tall as Hoppy and was far from voluptuous. Yet no other woman had ever moved him to such reverent, mystical excitement. In the black dresses or gray suits she wore—so prim and businesslike!—she still made Hoppy think of deserted tropical islands, white surf, glittering sunlight, and the excruciatingly perfect peace of being alone with the perfect woman.

That Miss Jessie Bell was any more than a woman sent out by an employment agency never occurred to Hoppy until an exchange with Mr. Bailey's private secretary, the bulky and grim-faced Mrs. Gallatin. Mr. Bailey himself was afraid of her. He called Mrs. Gallatin 'The Guillotine' behind her back, but said she was too efficient to be dispensed with.

One day a draft on the Dubric Estate came in just as Hoppy was leaving. Miss Jessie was out to lunch. Hoppy put the draft on Mrs. Gallatin's desk.

"If you will be so kind, be sure to see that Miss Jessie gets this immediately," he said.

"You bet." Mrs. Gallatin pitched the draft into a desk drawer and went on typing. The draft was for $47,085.73, Hoppy remembered clearly.

"I beg your pardon, I hope you won't forget to give that to Miss Jessie when she gets back," he said.

"*If* she gets back. She exited weeping."

"I don't understand."

Mrs. Gallatin ripped the paper from her typewriter with a screech of the platen. "You made me make a mistake, Hoppy! What don't you understand? Our sultry little lotus is probably at home, face down on the bed, sobbing her wounded heart out."

"But why?"

"Because she has probably just discovered that Bill Bailey has another girl-friend, or seven or eight of them. He'll have to talk hard, to get your Miss Jessie back at this price."

He still did not understand. "At what price?"

"She could be making twice what she makes here. You don't think it's your personality that keeps her on this crummy job, do you? All of Bill's babes think they're Number One. This isn't the first time he has kept one on the office payroll. It's cheaper that way; also more convenient."

Mr. Horace O. Palmer, who in fifty-one years had never once felt the pangs of love, felt something stab him all the way through. "You —you mean they're in love, she and Mr. Bailey?"

"Ha! That's one name for it."

Hoppy was staggered, but he came resolutely to the defense of the woman he now knew he loved. "I'm sure you are merely being malicious, Mrs. Guillotine," he said.

"You too? Oh, you poor lamb!" She studied him coldly. "Still, at least you represent respectability and a sort of frayed-cuff security. She's about ready to settle for something less than the gold key to heaven."

The next morning, Miss Jessie came in late, looking tired and careworn. She caught up with her work quickly, however, and brought some routine things to be initialed.

"Want to run the ledger, Mr. Palmer?" she said.

"Why would I want to run the ledger?" said Hoppy.

"You haven't audited me for some time."

He went on writing H.O.P. without glancing at the documents. Somehow he smiled. "All right, I'll get around to it someday. But you're my strong right arm, Miss Jessie. I couldn't run this job without you."

He handed her the documents, and suddenly she burst out, "Mr. Palmer, have you ever been in love?"

"I'm afraid not," he said, without a quiver. "Why?"

"Oh, I guess just that you're lucky."

"Lucky?"

"Yes. Some women are accident-prone, maybe. I never did fall in love with the right man. There was always something wrong with them."

He managed to smile. "You're young and mixed-up, Miss Jessie, but I'm sure life still holds happiness for you."

She shook her black curls. "I'm not mixed-up. The next time, it will be my head, not my heart. But you're a good man, Mr. Palmer. Real, real good! I hope that if you do ever fall in love, it will be with a good woman."

They never again talked like that, yet they never went back to the old, businesslike relationship, either.

Perhaps she had idolized Bill Bailey at one time, but not any more. Hoppy knew that she was

a woman in torment, but at the time, he had not known why.

Now he did. She had her reasons—$280,000 worth.

Yet she had stayed on the job. She went on making $295 a month, when with her ability she could have gotten $600 a month anywhere. All the time, she had been posting false deposits in a fictitious bank account, and storing $280,000 away in a safe-deposit box in her name.

Why? What was it that her head wanted, when her heart was broken? Money? And who had the key to the safe-deposit box?

Not Miss Jessie. Of that Hoppy was sure. Bill Bailey would never trust her that far. The key was on a dead body up at the Lake Arrowhead cabin, and the bank would be open tomorrow.

HORACE O. PALMER waited and mused, waited and mused, until he was entirely over the effects of the sip or two of the poisoned Manhattan. He tried once more to dial the cottage at Arrowhead. Once more, he let it ring a good twenty times. Once more, there was no answer.

Bill Bailey was dead. The Dubric Estate could still be salvaged. So could Hoppy's own faultless reputation.

On the other hand, there were Miss Jessie, $280,000 in cash, and somewhere a sunny island where the sunlight glinted like diamonds on the white surf and a man could be a *man*.

Hoppy dialed again. As he waited for someone to answer, he realized that he knew both Miss Jessie's and Bert Kissinger's number so well that he could dial either without thinking. That was just what he had done this time, and he had no idea which one would answer.

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Featuring

# KEVIN KAR

# THE AGENTS

*When the trouble started it could have been one of many things—a spy network conspiracy, hoods erasing an annoyance or . . . a passport to hell for Agent Kar.*

## by MAX VAN DERVEER

THE FLATS ENCASING the girl's bare, brown feet were scuffed, the hard heels slanted from wear. Her skirt and blouse were cheap and had been washed too many times. But she was neat, tiny, trim and young. Perhaps twenty-four. And she was quick. Not furtively quick. Rather, it was a reflexive, unconditioned quickness. One instant, she could be before you; the next she could be gone.

Trailing her, you had to be alert. You couldn't afford to take your eyes from her for as long as it would take a startled fly to leave a windowsill in darting flight.

Her true name was Marta Ordinski, but since arriving in the United States she had shortened it to Marta Ord. Now she moved on short, bird-like steps along the pedestrian-glutted sidewalk. She didn't seem to be in a hurry, but she walked swiftly, as if she had a definite destination in mind. Late afternoon sunshine glistened against the sway of long black hair and off the tan coloring of her dancer's calves. There was a graceful sway to her hips.

I kept pace about fifty feet back. Somewhere behind me was my partner. We had picked up Marta Ord when she had left the branch office of the employment agency. It had required two days to find her here in the shank of the unfa-

miliar city and now she was to be under twenty-four hour surveillance. We expected that her brother Andrei would eventually come to her.

The snail crawl of the convertible was my warning. Traffic was moving swiftly along the street. But not the new, top-up convertible. It crawled into the corner of my eye and I risked a glance. I saw two men inside. Then the car was ahead of me and premonition was alive inside me.

Suddenly the large taillights flashed bright. The convertible swung into an open slot at the curbing. A young man of elephantine stature rolled from it, and regained his feet in a swaying lurch.

I froze as Marta Ord screamed. The big man had grabbed her about the waist and was dragging her back toward the convertible. He had lifted her from the pavement, and her arms and legs flailed the empty air as she struggled to free herself. People broke for cover.

I sent two men sprawling against parked cars as I came abreast of him. My fist smashed against his forehead and brought a surprised howl from him. He staggered back, taking the girl with him.

Training made it automatic then. I used my advantage mechanically. I grabbed the thick wrist on the girl's chest with both hands, dipped and yanked. His grip on her relaxed and she spun out of the grasp as I dug in with my heels. The arm snapped and straightened and suddenly the man was leaning away from me, off balance.

I planted my feet and whirled. He stumbled around me. Then something caught my heels. I sat down hard and grunted my dismay as the wrist slid from my hands. Nor could I believe what I saw when he stumbled across the sidewalk and straight into the open door of the car. He sprawled half in and half out of the convertible until a hand caught the back of his coat and precipitately yanked him inside.

The convertible leaped forward, crashed into a sedan, rocked back, and swung out into the line of traffic.

I could have snaked the gun from the rig under my arm or I could have gone for the special gun that would have roasted both guys and the convertible in a mushroom of fire. But we were under orders. The last thing Holly said was, "You two play this one straight. Use your real names. Kevin Kar. Sandy Miller. Avoid local police interference if possible. But if identity is necessary, you are federal agents. And"—He paused significantly. "No killing. You are not executioners this trip. It's the film we want destroyed, not people."

Then Holly had waved us out of the inconspicuous office that is

the hub of Washington's most secreted bureau.

Marta Ord was on one knee, her fingers pressed to her throat. I went to her quickly and lifted her. She was light and shivering. Her eyes gleamed like brilliant, black opals in the pale and unpainted face.

"Are you okay?" I asked gruffly as the people began to close in on us.

"Y-yes—I think so," she replied in her heavily European accent.

"Who was your friend?" I demanded.

She flinched. "I—I do not know."

"Who are you?"

The opal-like eyes searched my face. White teeth caught her lower lip. "I am—I am Marta Ord," she said, spacing her words carefully. "I am not long in your country—seven months. I am a ballerina, but I am—how you say?—unemployed?"

I had wondered if she would lie. She had not.

"Marta!"

The heavy voice exploded out of the crowd behind me. I whirled. A man with a thick mane of gray hair tapped toward us on an oak-colored cane. I instinctively judged him to be near sixty. The sun sparkled off his dark glasses and there was a metal cup hooked to a belt that, along with dull yellow suspenders, held up sagging trousers. Multi-colored pencils jutted from the cup.

Marta Ord went around me in a flurry of movement and grasped the man's bicep. "I am all right, Jock!"

I heard the police siren then. The squad car was still two blocks away. I looked among the sea of faces, found my partner, and melted. My value as Marta Ord's tail had vastly diminished. Now she was Sandy's package.

I walked two blocks, flagged down a cab, went to the hotel and waited for the phone call. I thought about the attempted abduction. Had it been a genuine attempt or had it been a diversionary action, something to draw me into the open?

And who were the men in the convertible? Who did they represent? Another government? Perhaps they were underworld hoods. Either or both could want Andrei Ordinski and the microfilm.

It was ten minutes after six o'clock when the room phone jangled. I allowed the phone to ring three times before I lifted the receiver and waited—as we had prearranged—for my partner to speak first. "Sandy, Kevin," she said.

"Calm?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Where?"

She gave me an address.

"Nine," I said.

"All right."

I had time to freshen and eat

before relieving Sandy at nine o'clock, and while I showered I mused over why we had been sent to this city. Andrei Ordinski was a legitimate actor who had a real life role of agent for a Communist government in Europe. Some weeks earlier he had been sent by his government to England to kidnap a British scientist who had perfected a nerve gas. The gas was a pip. Liquid, odorless, colorless, tasteless, it could produce death within twenty minutes and an autopsy would show no unusual chemicals present in the victim's body.

Most doctors would say the victim had died naturally of a respiratory failure.

The gas would be a deadly weapon in the hands of an enemy, an effective murder weapon for hoodlums. And we were sure both elements wanted Andrei now because Andrei, instead of kidnaping the scientist, had photographed the gas formula and had defected for reasons we did not know. The defection had taken this out of the hands of Interpol and the FBI. Andrei had been given to us in the Bureau.

He had come to the United States. Our people had traced him to a freighter and across the Atlantic right up to about one mile off New York City where he had jumped ship. The freighter captain had not reported him because he had taken on Andrei without a passport. And it had required a few hours to break the captain.

By then, of course, we had lost our link with Andrei Ordinski, so now we—with others, it appeared—were working on the only premise we had left—that eventually Andrei would attempt to contact his sister Marta even though, according to our dossier on her, she was not directly involved in any kind of espionage activities. We wanted Andrei. Worse, we wanted the microfilm. The film had to be destroyed.

I left the shower, toweled vigorously, shaved and walked out of the bath. I stopped dead. I had company. He sat on the edge of the bed. He was a bantamweight Negro with symmetrical good looks, neat and immaculate in an expensive dark blue hat and suit. There was no expression on his face. A ring of keys dangled from a finger on his left hand and I knew how he had entered. The .45 automatic held loosely in his right hand followed me as I moved casually toward the bureau where I had carefully placed my guns in the top drawer.

He said, "Far enough."

So he had looked and found the guns.

"Who the hell are you?" I said.

"Put on some duds. Mr. Barlotta wants you."

I knew the name. Harry Barlotta—The Duke. Once he had been a Windy City, Prohibition-

era big shot. Now he was gang lord of this city with a front of clubs and bowling alleys to cover his income from the tables, horses, slots and other rackets.

Holly had briefed us on him before we had left D. C. If any hood had the organization to know about and find Andrei Ordinski, it would be Barlotta. Barlotta's underworld stretched across the seas. And I now knew, too, how Barlotta had discovered me. Two can play the double shadow game. When I had thwarted the abduction of Marta Ord by two of his thugs and later faded from the scene, another of his muscle men —the one sitting on my bed now —had tailed me.

I decided I had time and wanted to meet this Barlotta. That's why I didn't give the Negro a shot of tear gas from the ring on my left hand.

He put away the .45 and we left the room. When we were outside the hotel, he touched my arm and bobbed his head toward a new sedan braked at the curbing. I saw a shadow behind the steering wheel and another in the back seat. The rear door of the sedan opened. I ducked to slide inside—and froze at the surprised yelp behind me.

I started to back out. Fingers caught my arm and jerked me. I spilled face down onto hard thighs and lashed out wildly with my feet. A fist slammed down against the base of my spine. I jerked up my head, twisted on the guy's lap and struggled up into a sitting position. The muzzle of a gun dug into my ribs.

"No noise," a gravel voice rasped in my ear.

I stared out on the sidewalk. The Negro was pinned between two wide men in dark suits. One of the bulks—a guy in heavy, dark-rimmed glasses—held the Negro's arms up high behind his back and the other was pressing a gun against his ear.

The man with the gun said, "Get out of the heap, Washington. Make it fast."

I recognized him in the shadows. He was the guy who had jumped Marta Ord that afternoon. But before I could move, I heard a click in the front seat, metal against metal, and the man beside me muttered an oath. "Easy does it, Andrew," he cautioned as the driver slid toward the sidewalk door.

I saw the flash of the gun in the shadow's hand the instant he lifted it and knew the gun had been equipped with a silencer. I heard the *pffft* sound and the groans from the sidewalk. The gunman outside was down on the walk and groveling and the Negro was stepping into him.

I saw him kick the gun from the man's hand and turn on the other bulk in the same motion. He doubled the man with a fist into his middle and chopped him down to

the walk with a short, driving blow against his ear.

The man lifted his head groggily and caught the toe of the Negro's shoe under his chin. The instant he went limp the Negro piled into the front seat of the sedan beside the driver.

"Who was them guys?" the voice in my ear rumbled as we moved into traffic. He pushed me into a

corner and clawed the Negro's shoulder.

"Shut up," the Negro panted without looking around. He took time out to set his hat more firmly on his head.

HARRY BARLOTTA lived in baronial splendor. When the Negro usherec' me into the living room we found Barlotta eating large, raw oysters. He was plucking them with a chubby forefinger and thumb from a fancy glass bowl that was balanced precariously on a thick thigh. He kept on plucking as he listened to the Negro recall the skirmish.

"I never saw 'em before," the Negro finished.

"They wanted this guy, huh?" Barlotta grunted.

"Yeah. They called him Washington."

Barlotta popped another oyster into his mouth. "That you? Your name Washington?"

I knew three things: those who had attacked the Negro were not The Duke's boys, but they knew who I was, and Barlotta did not. I said, "Yeah, that's me."

He contemplated me for a few seconds. He sat in the high-backed wing chair, massive and paunchy, his pumpkin-soft face florid, and stared at me. Then he pulled at his dewlap and said in a surprisingly soft voice, "All right, Linc, beat it."

The Negro faded.

"Sit down," said Barlotta. His small eyes were bright as pinheads in the folds of fat of his face. He waved an oyster nonchalantly toward a wing chair opposite him, popped the oyster into his mouth, jerked at the lavender housecoat that covered his girth and gave me a smile that didn't mean a thing.

"Sit down and relax," he said. "No fuss, please."

I sat.

Barlotta almost smiled. "You want a beer?"

"Why not?"

He did smile this time. "I like you, Mr. Washington," he said. "I think we're gonna talk sense. Nocturne?"

She came out of a doorway be-

hind him, a long-legged, indolent white-blonde with alabaster skin and wearing a tight-fighting, lilac-checked playsuit.

"A beer for Mr. Washington," said Barlotta. He chuckled at me. "Nocturne is my housekeeper."

"You have a stable of cute playmates," I said.

He shrugged. "I can afford them. But let's talk about you, Mr. Washington. Who are you? What's your interest in Marta Ord?"

"Who is Marta Ord?"

Nonplussed, he brushed an imaginary fleck of lint from the bulge of his stomach. "And here I thought we were gonna get along."

"Who is Marta Ord?" I repeated.

"All right," he said. "Let's take it from another angle. This afternoon you assisted a girl. Tonight a couple of my boys were jumped. These dudes knew you. You must know them."

"Look, Mr. Barlotta," I told him. "I just happened to be there. I'm walking down this street, see? There's a girl in front of me. She's cute, put together nice. Okay, I'm walking along, taking her in, and suddenly a guy jumps her. I jump the guy. It's that simple."

"Sure it is, Mr. Washington," he said, nodding without looking at me. "I can see how simple it could be. But I prefer to look at it from a complicated point of view. Let's say there's a guy named Andrei Ordinski—a guy who happens to be this Marta Ord's brother. Let's say he has a certain strip of film. Let's say you know about the film. Let's say you want it and have made a deal with this Andrei. Let's say this Andrei is hot. He's gotta stay low, way low, down deep. But let's say he manages to pass the film to his sister.

"Then let's say you set up a fake struggle on a busy street in broad daylight. Let's say you hire a couple of heavies to fake a kidnaping right off the street, a kidnaping you, as an innocent, happen-along guy can break up. Let's say this allows you to be close to the girl, to touch her—let's say it even allows her to pass something to you! Then let's say, it's gonna take you a few hours to get out of town. Let's say you keep the heavies to protect you until—"

"You sure do want things complicated, Mr. Barlotta," I cut in, frowning.

"I learned a long time ago, boy," he said significantly, "never be fooled by the forest. Look at the trees."

"Well, you sure took a complicated look."

"I want that film, boy!"

"Sorry," I said innocently, "I don't know what you are talking about."

Nocturne appeared with two steins of beer. I reached for one of the steins. Barlotta slapped it from her hand viciously. "Linc," he bawled.

The Negro appeared immediately.

"Mr. Washington has elected to remain with us," he said stonily, ignoring the beer that was seeping into his three-inch deep carpeting.

I stood up. Linc moved in beside me. They were perfect. Three monkeys in a row. I brought my left hand up to my ear and squeezed. The jet of tear gas from my ring shot into Linc's eyes. He howled as I turned the blast on Nocturne. She screamed. I gave Harry Barlotta a double shot. He cursed.

And then I was on my hands and knees and had Linc's .45 in my hand. One of the big guys, the guy called Andrew, loomed in a doorway. I shot his legs out from under him. Another sprang into view like a puppet on a wire. I put a slug into his shoulder. It spun him completely around and he went down. I leaped over them and bolted from the mansion.

So far, I was following orders. I hadn't killed anyone.

On the street out front, I flagged down a driver who stared at me as if I might be a fugitive from the Ancient Order of Druids until I waved the .45 at him and pointed downtown.

I CHECKED OUT of the hotel and into a motel, then rented a car and drove toward the address Sandy had given me. I parked two blocks south of that address and walked. It was almost ten o'clock and I was on familiar ground.

I passed the spot where the attempted abduction of Marta Ord had taken place, walked another block and saw Sandy coming out of the shadows toward me. We passed in the circle of light cast down by a street lamp.

"Second brownstone this side," she said without breaking stride. "Basement. Last door."

"Car," I said. "Two blocks, around the corner. Key in the ignition."

I turned down the warped steps of the brownstone. A single, naked light bulb cast a feeble light. The air was dead, musty. I found Marta Ord's door. A dust-coated cardboard sign tacked on the door behind me said—FOR RENT.

I went outside again, turned into an alley and got rid of my necktie. Stripping out of my trousers and coat, I stomped on them while I smeared dirt and grime from a brick wall on my face and shirt. Then, properly wrinkled and smudged, I returned to the brownstone and rented the room across the hall from Marta Ord.

I had been inside five minutes and was stretched out on the lumpy bed when the lockless door opened again and a guy I recognized—I had hit him that afternoon—came inside. He wore a fresh bandage on his cheek, he had a gun in his hand, and he indicated he wanted silence. He motioned me outside.

The gun disappeared, but I quickly felt the point of a flick knife against my spine.

The knife took me out of the building and across the sidewalk and into the convertible. I started to ask questions, but the edge of a hand slashed across my lips. We drove into the fabrics district of the city and turned into the deep darkness of a vacant warehouse. Then something hard and deadly crashed down on my skull.

I swirled for hours, it seemed, in a pit of nothingness. I knew I was coming around, regaining consciousness slowly, achingly, and I knew I should be flat on my face. But I seemed to be upright. I blinked. Whatever was under me moved. It swirled out and came back and spun around and then settled suddenly. Surprisingly, it was a cement floor and there were two pairs of thick-soled shoes.

I lifted my throbbing head and blinked the pair of wide men into focus. They were bathed in bright ceiling light. One of them stared back at me from behind heavy, dark-rimmed glasses. The other wore a bandage on his left cheek and held a flick knife loosely in his hand.

I felt the cold spread over my body and the tightness at my wrists and ankles. Suddenly I realized that my wrists were above my head and spread wide.

Slowly I turned my head to the right and left. Short lengths of rope went from my wrists to iron rings that dangled from a wall brace. I looked unbelievingly down on my spread ankles. Same thing.

"What do you think, Moss? How tough is he?"

I stared on the pair. They were the same two men who had attempted to abduct Marta Ord and later had jumped Linc.

Their eyes blinked at me from behind glasses. "Are you tough, Washington?" One of them asked.

His face remained a mask. He took a deep breath. "Maybe we won't have to find out. Where is Marta's brother?"

It wasn't difficult to figure how they had tracked me. Instead of zooming far away from where they had made their abortive abduction attempt, they probably had only gone a couple of blocks and then the driver of the convertible—whom I hadn't seen—had doubled back on foot and, like Barlotta's boys, had followed me to the hotel.

The unfortunate part for them was Barlotta had decided to move in on me first. Thus the skirmish outside the hotel and one of them —the guy with the bandage—had been shot, but it had not been enough to keep them from trailing us to Barlotta's place and later watching me flee.

From there on, it had been simple. They had watched me check out of the hotel and into the motel, rent the car, and drive to Sandy. I had no idea how Sandy Miller had

died, but I imagined that it had been simple and quick.

I knew one other thing, too. They weren't ordinary hoods. These were agents of a foreign government, probably the same government Andrei Ordinski had once represented. And they knew who I was.

The guy in the glasses said, "Moss?"

His companion stepped into me with a tight grin. He held the knife high and flicked the point slowly with his thumb. "Where's Andrei?" he asked in a hollow voice. "Huh? You wanna tell us, Mr. Washington?"

"Police!" a shrill voice echoed from the stairwell.

I jerked and Moss spun away from me. He was the first to go down as Sandy leveled the dart gun and shot the tranquilizer into his chest. The man who wore glasses was next. He leaped, but the dart caught him in flight. He gasped and then he doubled and twisted slowly. His face was screwed up in surprise. Suddenly his eyes rolled back into his head and he pitched forward onto the concrete floor.

Sandy used Moss' knife to cut me free.

"And how," I asked as I took my guns from Moss, "did you manage to stay alive?"

"I saw them," she said, "as I was walking to the car. Fortunately, I spotted them before they spotted me."

"Fortunately," I grunted.

She looked down on Moss and his partner. They'd sleep for an hour. "And what," she asked, "do we do with them now?"

"We are not suppose to eliminate," I reminded her.

"I remember," she said, a little reluctantly.

I looked at the wall rings. She nodded. Then we stood Moss on his head and Sandy held him while I tied his left ankle and wrist to one set of rings. Then we tied up his partner in the same way. They dangled upside down at a crazy angle.

"Someone could hear them when they awaken," I said.

Sandy reached under her skirt and yanked down a half slip. She split it with the knife. We stuffed a half in each gaping mouth and left the basement. Moss and his partner could die—or they could live if someone wandered into the basement by chance in the next few hours.

Sandy drove me back to the building where I had rented the room. Marta Ord had not been under our surveillance for an hour and twenty minutes now. "She will recognize me," I said.

"It's been a long time since I've been stinking drunk," said Sandy, leaving the car.

"Be noisy," I told her. "Raise hell. Bang on her door."

Sandy jackknifed, looked at me through the open window, and

winked. "It hasn't been *that* long, Mr. Kar."

I grinned on the undulation of her sleek hips as she crossed the sidewalk and went down the steps into the basement. Two minutes later, I lost the grin. Sandy was moving fast out of the basement. She popped into the sedan and banged her palms against the steering wheel.

"She's gone!"

"Damn!"

"I banged and kicked," she said. "The door flew open. It wasn't locked."

"I know," I said grimly.

"I think we've been suckered."

"They've had us spotted since afternoon," I said. "Both of us. They watched you to follow Marta Ord here. They saw you set up. They knew I would relieve you sometime. They waited, took me. They wanted you to see them taking me. They knew you would follow. You did. Clear sailing for their friends to move in."

"If they have friends."

"How else?"

"Your man. Harry Barlotta. Someone could have followed you from Barlotta's place."

Although I didn't like it, I had to concede it was possible.

"Or," Sandy said thoughtfully, "she could have discovered she was being followed. She could have seen her opportunity to flee from us when Moss took you."

That, too, was possible.

"And now?" said Sandy.

"We begin again in the morning," I said wearily.

THE MORNING WAS sparkling and hot, but it did not produce the missing Marta Ord. I went back up to the sidewalk and leaned against the sedan as I took in the street. Everything looked normal. I didn't spot anyone who might belong to Barlotta or to another government. It was a few minutes after nine o'clock. I was to meet Sandy in the hotel snack bar at ten.

I started around the sedan, and then I saw the blind man. He was across the street. He had come around a corner building, and now he was tapping along the sidewalk, the cane probing steps for him.

I crossed the street and he stopped when he heard my steps. He cocked his head and listened hard. I said, "Yesterday afternoon I prevented two men from kidnaping someone you know."

"Yes?" he said curiously.

"Just how well do you know Marta Ord?"

"She is a friend. She is kind. She converses with me every day."

"Has she conversed with you this morning?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Not this early." His face pulled down into deep seams, and sunlight sparkled off the dark glasses bridging his nose. "Why are you—"

"Does she have friends in the

neighborhood?" I asked, ignoring the question.

"Certainly."

"Who?"

"Well, there's Miss Dawn. But "I'm not sure—"

"Where do I find her?"

"She lives in the same building as Marta. On the third floor, at the top of the steps. But I don't understand—"

I was moving away from him when I said, "Thanks," over my shoulder.

"Young man!"

I stopped, turned on him. His brow was pleated with wrinkles. "Is Marta in some kind of trouble? Are you a police officer?"

"Marta's in the clear," I said. "And I'm not a cop."

The blind man stood for a long time before turning and tapping away from me. I watched him go for a moment and then I stepped off the curbing. I was three strides into the street and deep in thought when I heard the shout from behind me: "Watch out there, young man!"

I heard the squeal of rubber sliding against concrete, saw the maroon sedan bearing down on me from my right, and leaped back. The sedan whipped across my front, slowed, then continued on its way.

Pulling in a long breath, I turned again and looked on the blind man. Thank God for his sense of hearing, his ability to parallel footsteps with the sound of the sedan's motor.

I shook my head and gave him a lopsided grin. "Thanks," I said. "You saved my life."

He lifted his cane in a small salute and then I was across the street and going into the brownstone.

I went up to the third floor. The door at the top of the stairway opened under my knuckles and I looked on a barefooted brunette with generous curves wrapped in a faded blue robe. She blinked out on me owlishly.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Miss Dawn?"

I attempted to see beyond her. A frightened Marta Ord, given the opportunity, might spend a night with a friend.

"Dawn Lawrence, yeah. What is the—"

I flipped an open wallet at her.

Her eyes widened slightly. "Cop?"

I put the wallet away and let her think the worst.

"Hey now," she exclaimed, "since when is it illegal for a girl to spend a night with her boyfriend?"

"You have a boyfriend inside?" I asked politely.

"Across town, you dope! I just got home. I was goin' to bed when you—hey, it ain't the boyfriend, is it? You thought he was here! You thought—" She let it trail off.

Her eyes narrowed shrewdly.

"What do you want, cop?" she asked suspiciously. "Have you caught my act? Is that it?"

I told her what I wanted.

She hesitated, then she opened the door wide and I entered the littered flat.

" 'Scuse the appearance," she said, flipping a handful of newspapers and magazines from a worn couch, "but I ain't much on housekeepin'. So it's little Marta you're lookin' for, huh?" She shrugged and looked down on chipped toenails. "I ain't seen her since yesterday, but like I say, I was busy last night."

She sat on the arm of a lumpy chair and dug a crumpled package of cigarettes out of a pocket of the robe. The robe neckline bulged as she fired the cigarette and she caught me looking.

"Don't mind me, fella," she said dryly. "I run around naked most of the time. It's my business. I skin at a joint over on Rockway. It ain't Broadway, but it's a livin'."

"Any idea where Miss Ord might be?" I asked.

Dawn Lawrence lifted eyebrows. "You expected to find her here maybe?"

"I thought she might have spent the night with you for one reason or another."

"Naw."

"Where would she spend a night?"

"How the hell do I know? Maybe she found a job. She's one of them ballerinas, you know? Maybe the job required that she spend the night with—damnit, mister, why come to me with a lot of questions? I don't know where Marta is. So she didn't sleep in her box last night. I don't blame her. That's a hole down there. She should have better. That's how come I've been tryin' to get her to go into the skin biz with me. She could live better.

"At least, she could get out of the basement. She's got a cute little figure, the kind you kooks go for. The only trouble is, she doesn't cotton to peelin' in front of baldheaded creeps. If she'd only—"

"Could she be with her brother?" I cut in.

"What brother?" Dawn Lawrence said without flinching. "I don't know nothin' about a brother."

"Yes, you do, Miss Lawrence."

Her eyes became shrewd again. She blew out smoke. "So you're a cop, huh? And polite. That's a damn rare combination. So okay, maybe Marta does have a brother. But she ain't with him. She hasn't seen him. And that's what's been buggin' her. She's been expectin' the guy to show for a week now, but he ain't been around. Say, what the hell's goin' on, anyway?"

"You're sure Miss Ord has not been contacted by Andrei?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Because she would have told me."

"Why?"

"Well, hell, we're friends!"

"So?"

"So I tell her things I wouldn't tell no other cat and she tells me things. Damnit, man, what's goin' on? How comes you're so interested in Marta and this brother?"

"It's a long story, Dawn."

She stared up at me from the arm of the chair. Then she grinned abruptly. "Okay, fella, so it's none of my business. Man, those sure are real crazy muscles you got. Where'd you get 'em?"

"I was born with them," I said, heading for her door.

"With you, it could happen," she said, still grinning. Then she said, "Know what? I don't think you're a cop. You don't smell like a cop, and you're too darn polite."

I left Dawn Lawrence with her thoughts while I took mine downtown to a hotel. So Andrei had not contacted his sister—if I was to believe a stripper. But could I believe her?

I asked Sandy when I sat opposite her in the tiny booth in the snack bar.

"You can believe her about one thing, I think," she said flatly. "Marta Ord didn't spend the night with her. At least, not all night."

Sandy's face didn't tell me a thing.

"Marta is dead," she said. "It's been on all the newscasts this morning. She was found in a trash can in an alley. She was sliced several times with a knife, but she died of a heart attack. Police theory: No cuts were fatal. She was tortured. Her heart finally gave out."

"Moss," I breathed.

"Moss was a knife man," Sandy said.

"The warehouse?"

"I've been there this morning," said Sandy. "First thing after I heard the newscast. Moss is still alive. Just barely. The other one is dead."

"So it had to be before they picked me up—or it has to be Harry Barlotta."

"Let's stick with Moss."

"Figure it."

"They made the attempted grab on the street. That means they figured Andrei had already contacted Marta. They were going to bleed Andrei's hiding place out of her. But you broke it up. Moss recog-

nized you for what you are. I don't know how. Possibly from another job. But the point is, he recognized you and they followed you to the hotel. Then Barlotta grabbed you. This they didn't understand. So one trails you to Barlotta's place while the other—Moss probably—went after the girl. I don't know how he got past me, but he did. Somehow, he got her out of the building. Maybe he entered and took her out back. One person can't be on both ends of a building.

"Anyway, he attempted to get her brother's whereabouts out of her by torture. Her heart gives out. Suddenly she's no good. He returns to her place, knowing that his partner will come back there sooner or later. His partner shows when you do. They still don't understand Barlotta's part, but Barlotta is not important. You are important. Maybe you know where Andrei is. They take you. They ask you about Andrei. It means they hadn't found the film."

"You?"

"They didn't know about me until I appeared in the warehouse."

It figured.

"And now?" she said.

"If Andrei is in the city, he'll be gone as soon as he hears a newscast."

"Maybe already."

"Yeah."

"Back to Washington?"

"What else?"

"Holly isn't going to like this."

'Holly can go to hell," I said. "Holly isn't dead."

"And Marta Ord is, you mean."

"You go ahead," I said, leaving the booth. "Catch a flight. I have to make a stop."

"The warehouse?" she said, joining me.

I paid her tab and we walked out into the lobby. "The warehouse," I said grimly. "You said Moss was still alive."

She nodded somberly. She understood. "You never have condoned torture, have you? Death you understand. Quick, final death. A gunshot. An explosion. A car striking one down in the street. Poison. Fire. Someone tumbling from a building roof. Drowning. Even—"

"You hit it!" I exploded.

She stared at me.

My thoughts churned.

"An everyday happening," I breathed.

"What?"

AND THEN Sandy Miller was beside me in the rented sedan and we were tooling across town. She remained silent until I put the sedan into a parking slot at the curbing. "What?" she repeated as I motioned her out of the sedan.

I ran up the stairs to the third floor and banged on the door. Dawn Lawrence was a long time opening the door, and when she did, she was loggy with sleep. It required a few seconds before she

had me in focus. She smiled until she noticed Sandy.

"How long has Jock been in the neighborhood?" I shot at her.

Furrows creased her brow. "Jock? The blind man? I dunno. Week, ten days maybe. He just showed."

"Where does he live?"

The furrows deepened. "Two places down, I think. He's got a room in the basement, but it's—"

"Get specific."

Dawn Lawrence did.

When we returned to the sidewalk, Sandy said, "I'm lost."

"Hang on, honey."

We turned in at another brownstone and went down cracked steps into the basement. There was a door to our left. I ignored it and returned to the dimly-lighted rear of the building. Dawn Lawrence had said we would find a second door there. We did.

I hammered on it and it opened immediately. The dark glasses bridging Jock's nose and the seams in his face didn't move.

"Yes?" he said carefully.

"You recognize my voice?" I asked.

"Oh, yes. You're the young man who—" He let it trail off, then he said, "But you sound very grim. And who is that girl with you?"

"We want to talk to you about Marta, Jock."

He hesitated before moving out of the opening. "Certainly. But I don't know what—"

"She's dead," I said.

He stiffened. The muscles in his face were suddenly dancing. He shuffled his feet. "H-how?"

I told him.

He took it without moving. And then he turned and went carefully to a warped bureau. There was a large, ancient curved pipe on the bureau top. His fingers wrapped around the pipe and he stood with his head bowed.

It was what I needed. I took out my gun. Sandy's eyes questioned me. I shook my head for silence and moved in quietly behind Jock. I lifted the gun until the muzzle was on an exact level with the back of his head.

It was a long time before he turned. He came around slowly. But when he saw the gun pointed straight at his nose, he grunted and recoiled slightly against the bureau.

"You killed her, Andrei," I said softly. "You killed your sister merely by showing up here."

He stood frozen for several seconds before he surprised me. He dipped and shot a fist into my stomach. I reeled back and saw him leap toward the door, his fist sailing toward Sandy.

She recoiled, ducked under the fist and rammed the top of her head against his chest. The blow stopped his flight and the pipe flew from his fingers. Then Sandy caught his arm and flipped him into a wall. He hit the wall hard,

shuddered, and slid down to the floor.

The toupee slipped back on his head to reveal short-cropped dark hair.

I took Andrei's shoulders and propped him against the wall. He was stunned, but conscious. He sat slumped and shaking his head. I removed the dark glasses from his nose and wiped the seams from his face. Taking the toupee, I made a man of sixty become a man of thirty.

I looked at Sandy. "One of his professions was acting," I said. "An actor could disguise himself as a blind man."

"But something hit you back there in the hotel," she pressed.

I nodded. "When you were reeling off all of the quick ways Marta could have been killed. By gun, by explosion, by car. I almost was run down by a maroon sedan this morning, but a man who was supposed to be blind shouted a warning. I thought then he had heard the sedan approaching. But what if he saw it?"

Sandy Miller frowned.

"I was behind him when I stepped into the street," I continued. "He was moving away from me, walking in the same direction the sedan was traveling. His back was to me and the sedan. But if he turned, if he was watching me cross the street, if he saw the sedan coming at me—"

I let it hang.

"Yes," Sandy said slowly.

I looked down on Andrei. "We need a microfilm."

He twitched. "I—I didn't want Marta to get hurt," he said brokenly.

"Then you should have remained completely away from her. The film?"

"I—I had to come here. She was the only person I had left. This was the only place I had to go. I was going to sell the formula. Then Marta and I could go away. But people followed me. And I couldn't let her know who I was. I couldn't expose her to the—danger. Maybe in the weeks ahead I could reveal to her my true identity. But now there was danger, and—"

"The film," I repeated.

"My—pipe."

I found it on the floor and studied it curiously. I twisted the bowl and found that it unscrewed. But instead of the entire bowl separating from the stem, I discovered that only the outer shell came free. Under the shell was a second bowl of slitted metal. The interior of the slit was insulated and contained a strip of film.

I removed the film and gave it to Sandy. She turned from us, but I knew what she was doing. Her fingers opened the buttons of her blouse. She peeled down an outer cup of her bra and placed the film inside. When she turned back to us she was buttoned.

"I'll take a cab to the airfield," she said.

"See you," I said.

She was gone when I took Andrei Ordinski out of the brownstone and into the sunshine. I put him into the front seat of the rented sedan.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"To the immigration people," I said.

He passed his hand across his mouth and swallowed hard. He looked at me. His eyes were bright.

"Why didn't you stop me?" he asked.

I shrugged.

"In an hour I will be dead."

"That long?"

"Why didn't you stop me?" he repeated.

"One less Red agent," I said.

He flinched.

I knew the deadly pill he had taken was already beginning to work.

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**Please print** **MARCH 1966**

# THE MI LO DIAMONDS

## by DAN ROSS

*In Bombay, as in New York, a clever jewel thief may find himself outwitted by the Law. But East or West of Suez, the sagacity of Mr. Wong was unique.*

THE MAN WITH the iron-gray hair and broad, florid face smiled up from his chair behind the desk in a most annoyingly assured manner. "There is no need to be troubled, gentlemen," he said.

Mei Wong, his portly figure clad in the usual immaculate white linen suit, exchanged an unhappy glance with the tall Inspector Bannerjee of the Bombay Homicide Division who stood beside him.

"Believe me we have no intention of interfering, Colonel Porter," the venerable art dealer said. And Mei Wong waved a pudgy hand toward the spread black velvet cloth on the desk with its glittering collection of perfectly cut diamonds. "These stones are worth a fortune! When I sold them to you I warned you to take all necessary precautions."

Inspector Bannerjee's bronzed face with its short black beard showed slight anger. "You must be aware, Colonel Porter, that murder has been committed several times for these jewels," he pointed out.

The florid-faced man nodded. "I know their history well. In fact that is one reason they intrigue me. I have every intention of transfer-

Featuring

# MR. MEI WONG

ring them to my bank vault later this afternoon."

Mei Wong's broad face showed relief. "That would be indeed wise," he agreed. "In the meantime may I offer the facilities of my own safe. Since we are both located in the same hotel building it would be quite simple for me to take care of them until you leave for the bank."

"There is no need of that," Colonel Porter protested. "I'm keeping my offices here locked. Aside from you two gentlemen I'll be seeing no one until I go to the bank. Only my lady secretary will be here with me."

"Since you have no safe here in your own quarters it would be wiser to leave them with Mr. Wong," the Inspector said with firm emphasis. "It is a risk to keep them unprotected in your possession for even a short period. Every newspaper in Bombay reported your purchase of the famed Mi Lo diamonds. A tempting item for any jewel thief."

The florid-faced man rose from his chair. "Call me stubborn if you will, gentlemen. But I prefer to do this my way." Porter paused and with an icy smile gestured toward the door. "Please do not let me detain you any longer. I also have many matters to attend to."

Neither Mei Wong nor Inspector Bannerjee said anything until they stepped into the elevator on the ninth and top floor of the Empire Hotel and were on their way down to the fifth in the creaking conveyance. The elevator, like the rest of the hotel, was a relic of better days. Its turbanned attendant paid them no attention after Mei Wong told him their floor.

The stout old art dealer gave the Inspector a grim glance. "Colonel Porter is not an easy man to deal with," he said.

Inspector Bannerjee shook his head. "Stubborn fool!" he muttered.

The elevator came to a lurching halt at the fifth floor and they left it to make their way along a dim, carpeted hallway. At last they came to a door with frosted glass that read: BOMBAY ART & CURIO CO.

Mei Wong inserted a key in its lock and they went in. The old Chinaman padded over to one of the windows overlooking the street and flung it open. At once the clamor down below became apparent to them, the monotonous tweedledee of a snake charmer's reed and gourd, the clanging of a tram car, and the sing-song background of many voices.

Inspector Bannerjee settled his spare form in one of the chairs by the art dealer's desk and glanced about the ornate studio with its showcases of porcelain, silver and ivory, its crimson tapestries and giant Buddha figures.

"You know there is at least one known jewel thief living on the floor below Colonel Porter," he

said. "You may know Rick Malini by reputation."

Mei Wong nodded as he came back to his desk and seated his ponderous body. "I have heard of him," he said. "Did you mention this to Porter?"

"I told him yesterday on the phone," the Inspector said with a sigh. "It seems to me he enjoys the idea of being in danger."

The old art dealer spread his hands in a questioning gesture. "Little else can explain his present behavior."

They went on to discuss other things until their conversation was interrupted by the studio door being thrust open and a frightened looking young blonde girl stepping hurriedly inside.

She glanced at Mei Wong. "You are Mr. Wong, the art dealer?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, rising and going toward her.

The girl's face was twisted with anguish. "Something dreadful has happened," she said. "Just now I came back to my employer, Colonel Porter. I found him stretched out on the floor by his desk."

Mei Wong gave Inspector Bannerjee a meaning glance and then asked the girl, "Did you check to see what his condition might be?"

She shook her head. "I was too frightened. I locked the door again and came directly here to you."

A few minutes later they stood in the inner of the two rooms belonging to Colonel Porter. Inspector Bannerjee had just risen from an inspection of the florid-faced man's body.

"He's been murdered," he announced. "Stabbed twice in the back. And of course the jewels are gone."

The girl sank into a nearby chair, and burying her face in her hands, began to sob violently. Inspector Bannerjee put through a call to the Police Headquarters of the Indian metropolis while Mei Wong gave his attention to the immediate surroundings of the crime. One thing baffled him, and not because of its importance. He was struck by the fact that the inner office seemed much brighter than before, now that death had entered it.

With a thoughtful expression on his placid face Mei Wong walked slowly out to the reception office and it indeed seemed much gloomier than the other room. Perhaps the way the rays of the afternoon sun were striking the building caused the illusion. He stood silently considering this.

After a moment Inspector Bannerjee rejoined him. "It seems we have the familiar locked room murder mystery," he said in a grim tone. "Thanks to Colonel Porter's obstinacy."

Mei Wong turned to his friend. "That is true. The Colonel said he was keeping the door locked to everyone but his secretary."

"That leaves only the windows," the Inspector said and went back to the other room and opened one of them. He stuck his turbaned head out and Mei Wong joined him. The street was a dizzying distance below and the roof of the old-fashioned building was at least twelve feet above.

The Inspector glanced up, shading his eyes from the sun, and said, "There's no fire escape. It would be impossible for anyone to get in here through the window unless they lowered themselves from the roof by a rope."

Mei Wong followed his glance and said, "One would assume such tactics would arouse attention."

"Somebody in one of the other buildings should certainly have seen whoever did it," Inspector Bannerjee agreed. "As soon as help comes we'll make a check of the roof and see if we can get any information from tenants across the street."

This was done within a short time. But there were no clues to suggest anyone had lowered himself from the roof to the window of the murdered man's office. And although several people in the opposite building had been sitting by their windows looking out none reported seeing anything as unusual as a man lowering himself down the facade of the hotel by rope.

It seemed a dead end. Yet Colonel Porter had been murdered in a locked room. The secretary insisted that the lock had recently been changed and she had the only other key.

When Inspector Bannerjee visited Rick Malini, the noted jewel thief, on the eighth floor he took Mei Wong along with him. Malini, a slim man with a cunning face, invited them into his comfortable room with a knowing smile. "I heard about what's happened from the elevator man," he said. "I expected a call from the police."

Inspector Bannerjee gave him a sharp glance. "I suppose you know nothing about it?"

Malini laughed. "Isn't that what you expected me to say?" And with a shrug, "I was out on an errand at the time."

"Have you anyone to prove that?" Bannerjee asked.

"Beyond the elevator man, I haven't," Malini said. "But you see I wasn't planning anything criminal, so I didn't prepare any alibi."

"You do have a record," Bannerjee pointed out. "And this crime comes within your line. I'm considering you as a possible suspect, and putting a man on guard outside your room until further notice. If you get any ideas you think may help you can locate me by phone in Mr. Wong's studio."

Malini's face showed anger for the first time. "I don't like being treated as a criminal," he snapped.

Inspector Bannerjee's smile was mocking. "Still, we know that is what you are."

A few minutes later in Mei Wong's studio the tall Inspector asked, "What is your opinion?"

Mei Wong's brow furrowed. Something was troubling him, crying from his subconscious but he couldn't say what. He sighed, finally, and said ,"Malini was very sure of himself. Either he is innocent or positive he has committed this

crime so adeptly you will never be able to prove him guilty."

The Inspector nodded. "He was out of his room. And I think he was the one. But how, if he didn't have a key and no way of getting in a window?"

"The window could not have been used," Mei Wong agreed. "You have at least three witnesses who would have noticed if anyone lowered himself to its ledge by a rope."

And then he paused and his eyes narrowed slightly as a new thought came to him with startling suddenness. He looked directly at the Inspector and said, "Let us go back to Colonel Porter's offices."

Inspector Bannerjee followed the now excited Mei Wong as the stout man quickly entered the first of the two offices, where he stood for a moment before going on to the inner office where the body had been found. A faint smile crossed the old Chinaman's face. He turned to the Inspector and nodded.

"Yes," he said. "Like a chameleon! I think we should make a search of Malini's room at once. We may find something interesting."

Inspector Bannerjee led the way to the elevator with a puzzled expression on his bronzed face. Mei Wong gave him no hint of what he might be thinking. Within a few minutes they were at Malini's door again. The Inspector nodded to the guard to stay in the hallway as he knocked twice vigorously at the door.

Malini was not so pleasant in his greeting this time. "Well?" he asked coldly, standing with the door half-opened and his hand on its knob.

Mei Wong eased his way inside. "If you don't mind," he said. "We would like to search your quarters."

"But I do mind!" Malini said, scowling.

"I'm afraid that's not important," Inspector Bannerjee told him.

With an almost uncanny instinct Mei Wong went straight to a closet. He searched its shadowed interior for a few minutes until he trium-

phantly produced a small pail and some rag-like garments.

He smiled at Malini, "You have had use of these, I believe," he said. "I have no doubt that in a turban and this shabby native costume no one would recognize you."

Inspector Bannerjee stepped forward. "What are you getting at, Wong?"

Mei Wong spoke evenly, "Malini used the chameleon approach to his crime. That is why no one noticed him. First, he disguised himself as a native worker. Then he armed himself with a pail and undoubtedly a leather safety belt. With these he could pose as the hotel window washer and use the safety belt to advantage to get him across from the hall window to the windows of Porter's office.

No one noticed him as he cleaned the windows of the inner office, because everyone was accustomed to seeing a window cleaner do this work. He was an integral part of a routine view. Not even Colonel Porter would be alarmed until it was too late. After Malini murdered him and got away with the gems he made his exit in the same manner.

"But he made one error. He didn't pause to clean the windows in the outter office. It was their murky condition in contrast to the brightness of the ones in the inner offices that caught my attention."

Mei Wong fished in the pail with a pudgy hand and brought out a cloth dripping with water. "If I'm not mistaken you'll find the jewels in this," he said.

Inspector Bannerjee took the damp folded cloth and carefully opened it to reveal the diamonds, while Rick Malini watched with an unhealthy pallor on his stricken face.

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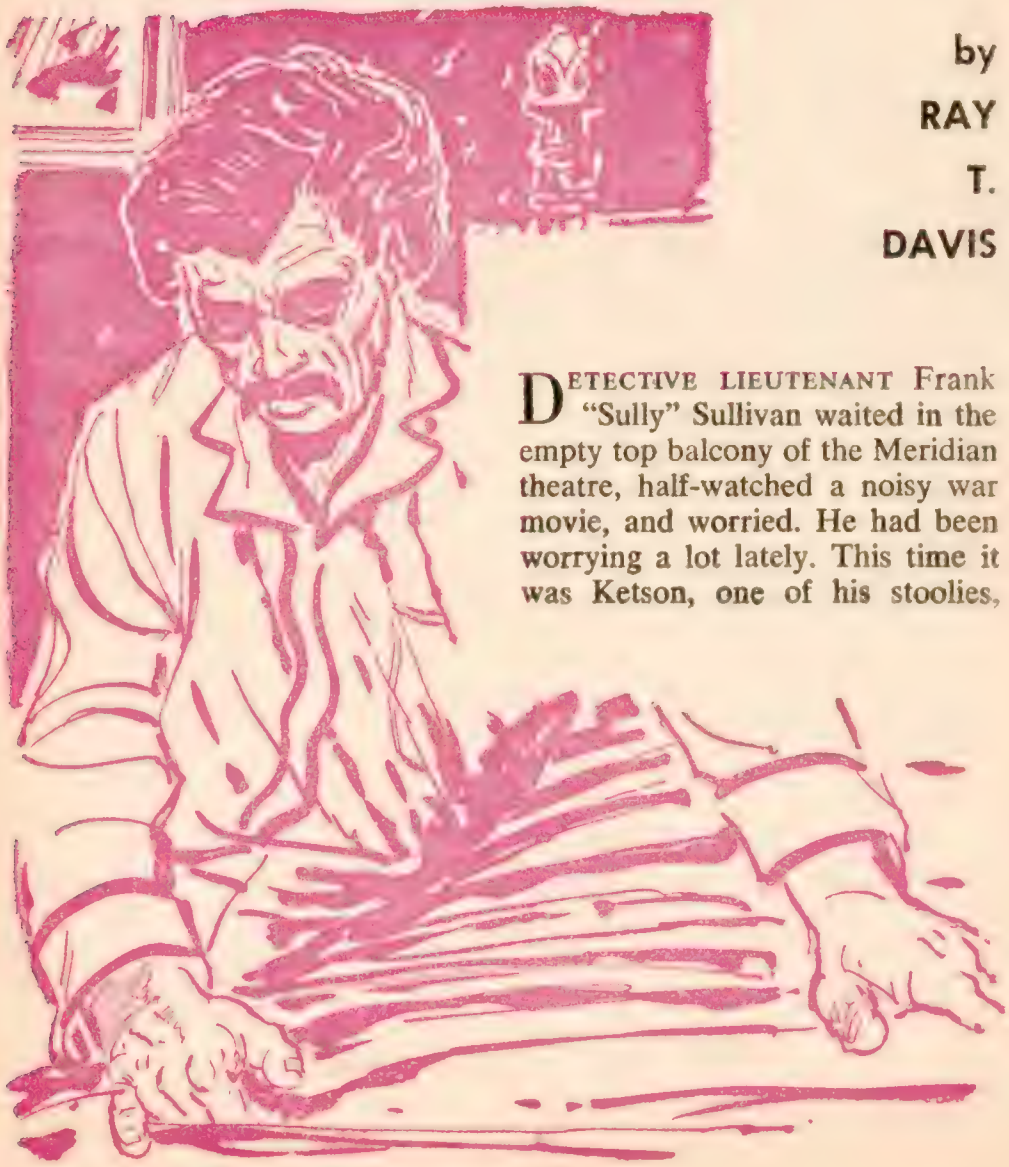
# A ROLL OF FILM

*The renegade hood had agreed to tell the grand jury everything he knew. So keeping him alive became a problem in hotel suite logistics.*



by
RAY
T.
DAVIS

DETECTIVE LIEUTENANT Frank "Sully" Sullivan waited in the empty top balcony of the Meridian theatre, half-watched a noisy war movie, and worried. He had been worrying a lot lately. This time it was Ketson, one of his stoolies,

who had phoned for a midnight meet. You never knew about Ketson. In the past he had supplied some good information, but many of his tips had been worthless. Being a junkie, he sometimes had trouble separating fact from vivid narcotic dreams.

Sullivan watched a tall spare figure approaching stealthily along his row of seats. On the screen soldiers were marching and martial music filled the theatre. Ketson dropped into a seat and crouched there. This time he wasn't shaking; he was fortified with his vice.

"A friend of mine who gets around worked the floating crap game last night, Sully," Ketson whispered. "Some real money men were talking, and they mentioned your name."

The big lieutenant looked interested.

"You head up the detail guarding Alec Mitev," Ketson went on, keeping his voice low.

"It was in the papers."

"Metropole hotel—suite nine seven?"

Now Sullivan swore softly. The secret was out. "Let's have it all," he said.

"They say Mitev is already as good as dead. My friend heard one guy laugh and say, 'X marks the spot.' Sully, what's that mean?"

Sullivan clenched his hands, a part of his worry syndrome. "Some of the young crowd must have picked it up from hearing the old timers talk. Twenty—thirty years ago it meant a killing."

The meet was ended, and he gave his pigeon some money, wondering whether the police contingency fund would reimburse him. He followed Ketson out of the theatre and watched the haunted figure disappear down the street.

Sullivan walked the half-mile to the old Metropole, breathing in the cool night air, and worrying the case around in his mind. From the start he had expected the Mitev detail would spell out trouble in block lettering five inches tall.

The proper way to keep the aging gangster under protective custody was in a jail cell. But Alec had been afraid of jails, or had wanted his usual comforts—or both. He had demanded a hotel suite and got it. He had to be pampered. He was not under arrest, although the government was building a deportation case against him.

Right at the moment his status was that of a voluntary witness who had walked into Headquarters two weeks ago and offered to spill what he knew about the city's crime syndicate.

Alec Mitev had been a high figure in the syndicate until he'd fallen out with the so-called Young Bloods over their share of the revenue. In anger they had given out a contract on him. Somebody had tipped Alec in time, and he'd run to the police for protection. In exchange, he'd agreed to appear be-

fore next month's special grand jury with a complete list of names and dates.

Actually, Sullivan already had it all on tape. For days they had questioned Mitev and recorded every word. His appearance before the grand jury was a legal formality to put the information into the record. None of it was proof *per se*. But in its own way the material was explosive enough, because it gave the country a clear look inside the syndicate's operations.

Newspapers had been building up the suspense with daily stories, most of them speculating on how much longer Alec Mitev had to live. It had become a bizarre power struggle between the police and the underworld,and Sullivan knew if he failed to protect Mitev from assassination—well, it would be a long time before anyone again offered to testify against organized crime

His big problem with guarding Mitev, Sullivan realized, was the conspicuous manpower involved. He had eighteen men, six on a shift. Two stayed in Mitev's suite, two were stationed in the corridor, and two more rode the elevators with strangers and watched the lobby.

About half the Metropole's guests were permanent, and it didn't take the nosier ones long to notice the activity around suite 907, and connect it with Mitev's press notices. By now, Sullivan figured, the whole gossipy hotel knew the identity of the mystery guest.

He stood in the middle of the block and stared at the Metropole's weathered bulk. The ninth and top floor was a long way up. After a moment he was able to make out the windows of Suite 907. Not a glimmer of light showed through the heavy drapes, and he could see no fluorescent X painted there. He grinned to himself. A wild thought, that one!

The hotel was flanked by a parking lot, and further on a vast one-story taxicab garage. It would be almost impossible, because of the angle, for a rifleman to shoot accurately into the windows, and a grenade or a machinegun could be ruled out. The range factor eliminated them.

Sullivan went into the hotel, nodded to the two plainclothesmen standing near the elevators, and rode up to the ninth floor. Here his men were alert, and on their feet, one stationed before the door to 907, the other down the hall near the locked door leading to the roof.

Detective Tim Novack nodded to Sullivan and rapped one-two-one on the door.

"Keep your eyes open," Sullivan told him. "We've been spotted."

Sergeant James opened the door slowly. Across the room, Detective Erickson stood with a machinegun trained on the door. He lowered the gun and Sullivan had a feeling of satisfaction that briefly over-

shadowed his worries. A hundred hoods would never be able to get past so many alert and armed men.

"How's our guest?" Sullivan asked.

Sergeant James scowled. "See for yourself," he said, gesturing toward the rear of the suite.

Sullivan went through the sitting room into Mitev's semi-darkened bedroom. Alec was in his striped pajamas, hunched at the side of the bed, smoking a crooked black cigar.

Soft music came from the clock radio on the bedtable.

Alec gave Sullivan a sullen look. He was a heavy-shouldered, paunchy man with swarthy skin, and bushy black hair. His normally brutal expression had changed into one Sullivan recognized. For the first time in many years Alec Mitev was frightened.

The lieutenant sat on the edge of the bed. Mitev spat. "I don't like it here," he complained. "Food's lousy, my ulcer burns, and I have to sleep with the lights on. Even the damn radio is no good."

As if he had willed it, the little radio gave off a blast of static. Alec stamped on the floor a couple of times, and it stopped.

"Pretty soon Uncle Sam will return you to the old country, Alec," Sullivan said cheerfully. "Then your worries will be over."

The gangster smiled, and lay back in bed. 'Good. I have many friends there. I'll be safe." He closed his eyes.

Sullivan switched off the radio and doused the one light. "Let him sleep," he told James. "He's got nerves—we've all got nerves."

DRIVING HOME at two o'clock, Sullivan was glad it was so late. Clare would be asleep, also his brood of four girls, and he wouldn't have to hear their anguished complaints. The oldest, Sally, had been graduated from high school and in spite of his promises to be there, he'd missed both the ceremony and the celebration afterward.

"We took pictures, and you weren't in one of them!" Clare had complained at the breakfast table. "Sully, your own flesh-and-blood daughter!"

Pictures! Sullivan winced as he felt the lump in his coat pocket. He was still carrying the roll of film he'd promised to have processed. He stopped at the neighborhood camera shop, wrote an urgent note and dropped it with the film down the letter chute.

Next day at noon he was back in suite 907, pacing the floor. Sergeant Haines, on the day watch, reported that Alec had complained of nausea and stomach pains. No, it couldn't have been the food, because they were all eating the same food. Alec had a prescription for his ulcer and a detective had taken it out to be refilled. He'd ques-

tioned the druggist, and learned it was a non-dangerous tranquilizer.

"Good," said Sullivan irritably, "stuff him with tranquility."

He didn't like the disadvantage police had in this contest. If Alec somehow managed to commit suicide—even if he died a natural death—the law would be the loser. Nobody would believe the syndicate hadn't carried out its threat.

The ninth floor was totally occupied by permanent residents, retired people whose only danger was in their gossip. He thought of the floor below, especially suite 807. According to the desk clerk, an elderly man had reserved it by wire from Cleveland and had arrived three days ago. He'd told the clerk he was in the city on a combination business-pleasure trip, and each day about noon he had left his room carrying a valise. Detectives had tailed him twice. He'd spent both days visiting old book stores in a rented car. The late afternoons he'd spent roaming the big art museum.

Sullivan looked at Sergeant Haines. "Put a tail on room eight-o-seven again today. After he leaves get a pass key and we'll search his suite."

The search, conducted in the afternoon, turned up nothing but old books and some clothes with Cleveland labels. By evening Sullivan was restless again. He had read the newspapers through to the want ads. Now he was reading the

department's weekly *Police Bulletin,* browsing down a description of recently stolen property, when the phone rang. It was his office telling him to call home at once.

Sullivan's heart was pounding as he dialed his home number. Sally asswered, sobbing so loudly he couldn't understand her words. In the other room, Alec's radio went haywire again with a surge of static.

"Say that again, Sally!" Sullivan demanded, eyes widening.

Suddenly he dropped the phone and ran for the door. Outside he motioned the two detectives to follow and raced down the stairs to suite eight-o-seven. Using the pass key, he opened the door carefully but still it squeaked.

An elderly man in shirt sleeves came from the bedroom, a big .45 automatic in his hand. He got off one wild shot before the detectives' return fire dropped him for keeps.

Sullivan moved into the bedroom and what he saw brought

him a vast feeling of relief. The detectives crowded behind him until all three were staring up at a black object about the size and shape of a sharp-nosed artillery shell. It was pressed against the ceiling, exactly over the center of the bed, held there by telescoping aluminum tubing.

"An x-ray machine," said Sullivan. "Murder by x-ray, almost."

Alec Mitev was quickly removed by ambulance to a private room in the county jail hospital. The white-coated police surgeon put away his equipment and turned to Sullivan with a disturbed look.

"We'll give him a thorough examination," he said. "I don't think any serious damage has been done. Of course, if these exposures had continued over the next few weeks —" He shook his head grimly. "Leukemia, very likely, and incredible damage to body tissues."

Sullivan and his men went back to 807, lowered the potential murder weapon to the floor and studied it. The lead shielding made it extremely heavy for its size. A timer, adjustable to tenths of a second, had been shorted out with a wire.

"Our man sat out in the other room during the night, plugging the power cord into a light socket at intervals. When he went out in the daytime he took the equipment with him in his valise."

Sullivan found his men staring at him in awe. "No, I'm not a Sherlock Holmes," he told them sheepishly. "Three things hit me at once. I was reading about a stolen dentist's x-ray machine in the *Bulletin*. When I called my daughter she screamed that her entire roll of graduation film had developed black. And at that moment static started again in the radio. The three suddenly added up. X marks the spot."

They looked puzzled. Too young to remember Prohibition, and the hoodlum slang of the Capone era, thought Sullivan, and suddenly he felt old.

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